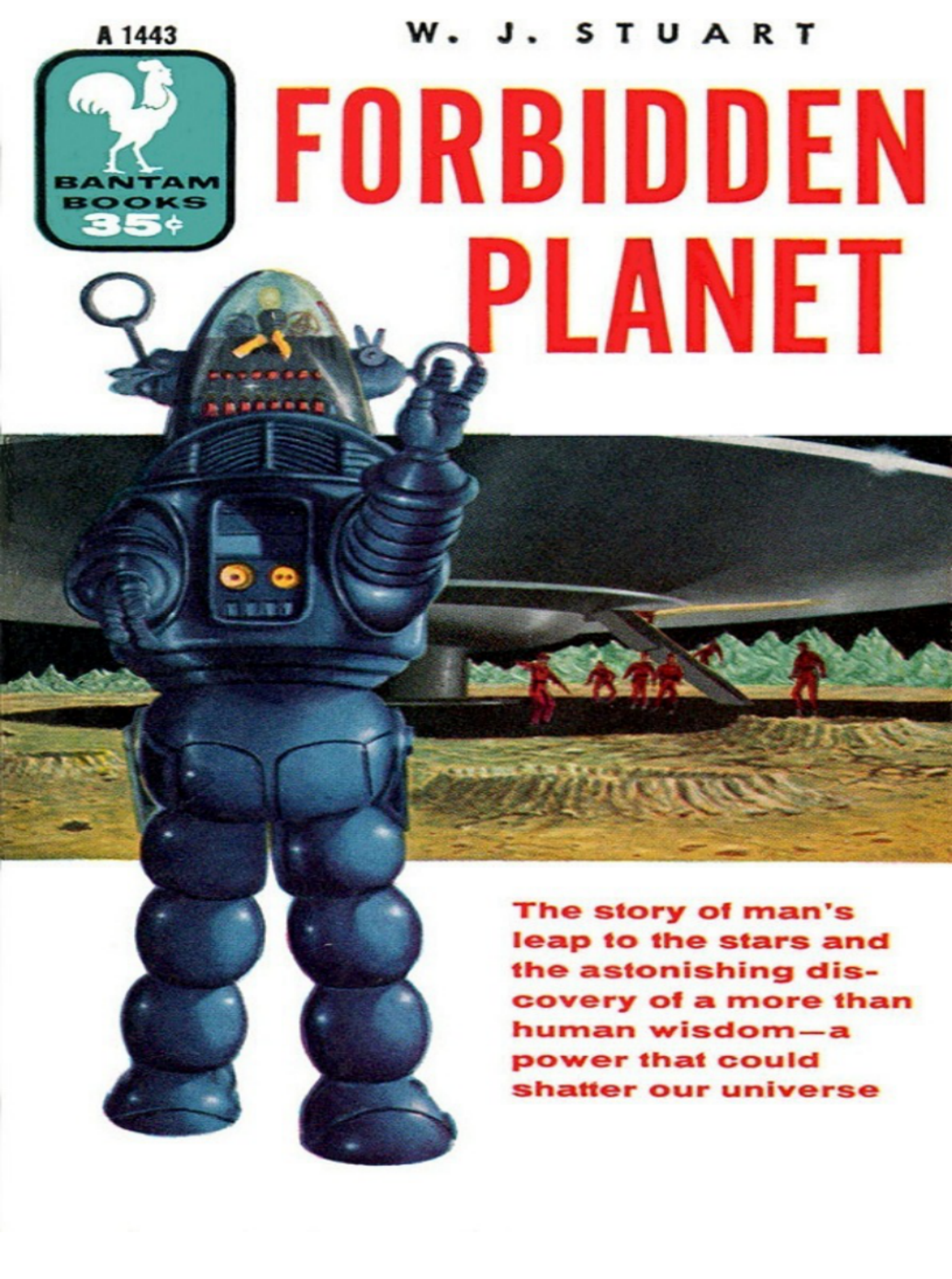

A 1443
W. J. STUART
BANTAM BOOKS
35¢
FORBIDDEN PLANET
The story of man's leap to the stars and the astonishing discovery of a more than human wisdom—a power that could shatter our universe



They were experienced space explorers. They'd sweated in the jungles of Venus and tasted the dust of dead planets. But nothing prepared them for Altair 4.

It was a paradise—sure. A topsy-turvy Garden of Eden—with green moonlight, golden grass . . . and the astonishing girl, Altaira.

But there was horror behind the beauty. There was non-human intelligence at work—and then there was the sudden, shrieking, agonizing death . . .

This was the forbidden planet—Altair 4.
And this is the story of the Earthmen who
risked everything to conquer its secrets.

M·G·M Presents

FORBIDDEN PLANET

STARRING

WALTER PIDGEON • ANNE FRANCIS • LESLIE NIELSEN

WITH

WARREN STEVENS

AND INTRODUCING

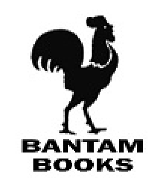
ROBBY, THE ROBOT

SCREENPLAY BY
CYRIL HUME
BASED ON THE STORY BY
IRVING BLOCK and
ALLEN ADLER
DIRECTED BY
FRED McLEOD WILCOX
PRODUCED BY
NICHOLAS NAYFACK

A METRO GOLDWYN MAYER PICTURE

FORBIDDEN PLANET

W. J. STUART



A Bantam Book / published March 1956

Bantam Books are published by Bantam Books, a division of Bantam
Doubleday Dell publishing Group, inc. Its trademark, consisting of the
words "Bantam Books" and the protrayal of a rooster, is Registered in U.S.
Patent and Trademark Office and in othe countries. Marca Registrada.
Bantam Books, 666 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10103.



PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CONTENTS

FORBIDDEN PLANET

FOREWORD

Excerpts from "THIS THIRD MILLENNIUM—A Condensed Textbook for Students" by A. G. Yakimara, H.B., Soc.D., etc.

(The following are taken from the revised microfilm edition, dated Quatuor 15, 2600 A.D.)

. . . So that in the year 1995 the first fully manned satellite Space Station had been established as a 'jumping off' place for exploration on the Solar system—and by the end of the year 2100 the exploration (and in certain cases colonization) of the planets in the Solar system had been more than half completed . . .

* * *

. . . It seemed then that Space conquest must necessarily be limited to the Solar system—and it was not until 2200, a couple of centuries after the full occupation of the Moon and fifty years after the final banding together of Mankind in one single Federation, that the conquest of Outer Space became a possibility instead of a scientist's dream. The possibility was brought about by the revolutionary Parvati Theory, which proved as great a step from the Relativity Laws as they themselves had been from the age-old gravity superstition. The Parvati Theory completely negated the Einsteinian belief that "At or past the speed of light, mass must become infinite"—and the way was open for such men as Gundarsen, Holli, and Mussovski to develop and transmute the Theory into fact. Their labors resulted, as regards the exploration of Outer Space, in what is now called the QG (or Quanto-Gravitum) drive . . .

. . . By the middle of the fourth century in our millennium the first exploratory trips beyond the confines of the Solar System had already been made, and all the time the design, construction and performance of Space craft were being improved . . .

* * *

. . . The early days of Outer Space penetration were naturally productive of many events and deeds which have since attained almost legendary quality, perhaps chief of these being the extraordinary story surrounding the two expeditions to Altair, the great mainsequence star of the constellation Alpha Aquilae. The first of these (Aboard the Space Ship *Bellerophon*) was launched, from Earth via the Moon, on the seventh of Sextor, 2351. The second (on the United Planets Cruiser C-57-D) was launched twenty years later almost to the minute . . .

In all the annals of Space History as known to man, there is surely no stranger tale than that of what befell the crew of the Cruiser C-57-D when it reached its objective, the planet Altair-4. Like all Cruisers sent on these investigatory missions, it carried a smaller crew than the big Space Ships, only twenty-one in all. Its Commander and Chief Pilot was John Adams. Under him were Lieutenant J.P. Farman, Astrogator; Chief Devisor and Engineer Alonzo Quinn; Major (Medical) C.X. Ostrow—

ONE

Major (Medical) G. X. Ostrow

Well, I'd asked for it hard enough—so it wasn't any good wishing I hadn't. But all the same, I couldn't help it. I wished I was anywhere except in this metal box, this huge oddly shaped shell which felt motionless as a mountain but was really hurtling across Nothing at more than the speed of light . . .

More than the speed of light! More than six hundred million terrestrial miles an hour!

At the beginning of the trip I used to find myself writing down that figure all the time—a six and then eight neat little zeros. But it didn't help. Although I knew it was true, my mind couldn't really accept it.

It was different for the other men, of course. They were used to it, used to the thought of it. Except for one or two old space-sweats who'd reached the age of thirty, they were all kids to me. Being over forty myself, I hadn't been reared to the idea of the QG drive. When I was their age speed was measured in thousands of m.p.h. and we never thought our lifetime would see Man breaking out of the Solar system.

More than six hundred million miles an hour! I knew I'd never get my mind to stop reeling at the thought of it. Or at some of its sequelae either.

Take what they call the 'time-squeeze' for instance. The kids knew—they automatically accepted—that while time is fixed at each end of one of these preposterous journeys, it is concertina'ed on the journey itself. I didn't know it; my mind kept rebelling against it. Not being a mathematician, I couldn't help regarding it as some sort of infuriating conjuring trick. John Adams had told me (and I'd checked with Quinn) that the 'squeeze' on this journey, which would be about a year for us, was in ten to one ratio. I'd smiled at them politely, and thanked them for the information—but my mind still boggled at the thought that even if we just reached our destination and went straight back to Earth, I'd only have spent twenty-four months on the round trip but all my friends would be twenty years older.

Except those of them who'd died in the meantime . . .

It didn't matter to me of course. Nothing had mattered much to me since Caroline's death. But at first I used to wonder about these youngsters who made up the crew. In spite of their youthfulness, most of them were experienced deep-space men—and I couldn't help worrying about what their lives must be like. Fancy falling in love, for instance, and then leaving on a trip and coming back to find the girl with grey hair and dentures!

It was this thought, really, that finally put me wise to them. They were a new breed—adventurers set apart from the rest of Mankind as adventurers have always, in a sense, been set apart. But with one great difference: adventurers, old-style, deliberately set themselves apart, secure in the knowledge that the rest of Mankind would wave tear-stained handkerchiefs from docksides and cry, "Come back soon!" But with these boys, nobody (in the personal sense, that is) wanted them to come back, soon or ever. Because nobody likes to be reminded of how rapidly he is approaching the grave—especially if the reminding's done by an uncanny contemporary who should be as old but somehow isn't . . .

So there they were—a bunch of youngsters who, on the surface, were just like any you might find in one of the Services, but underneath were hard-bitten way beyond their years and with no emotional ties to anything except each other and their extra-human work . . .

By and large I liked most of them at lot. And I think most of them liked me. They certainly took my advice and treatments without any complaint; in fact, before we'd been three or our months on the voyage quite a few of them were coming to me voluntarily, in between checkups.

But I never seemed to get really close to any of them, not even to any of the officers with whom, after all, I shared all of my off-duty life on the ship except for those hours spent in my own little eight-by-six cage of a cabin.

Whether they felt the same way about me or not, I don't know. I'm inclined to think they did—and that the reason for having this final barrier between us, like a sheet of invisible, impalpable plastic, was that I knew and they knew I wasn't really one of their breed . . .

II

I'm not likely to forget that three hundred and fifty-sixth breakfast of the flight.

I knew it was the three hundred and fifty-sixth, because I'd counted it off on my homemade calendar while I was shaving. So over my second cup of coffee I remarked on it—with intent.

I said, "The Cook and galley-staff ought to get a medal after this. Three hundred and fifty-six breakfasts—and I've never even thought of a complaint."

I made it very casual, because I was looking for information—and I'd found out early in the trip that one of the strongest taboos in space travel is the one which bans the very natural question, When do we get there?

But I wasn't casual enough. Not for Jerry Farman, anyway. He looked at me with his big grin, then winked at Adams.

He said, "Time him, Skipper! I can hear the pumps."

Adams looked at me. As usual, his expression didn't give him away. He said, "You ought to have tried that on Lonny Quinn, Doc. He falls easier."

"I don't know what you're talking about." I laughed to show I could take it. "And anyway, Quinn's on watch."

"And I," said Adams getting up from the table, "am about to relieve him." He started out, but looked back at me over his shoulder as he opened the door. "However," he said, "let's see what you think about Breakfast Number three sixty."

The door closed behind him. There'd been no particular inflection in his voice—and I wasn't sure I'd been told what I wanted to know until I noticed Jerry Farman's expression. He was staring after Adams in astonishment.

"Hell, Doc!" He was looking at me now. "You must rate high. Never thought he'd open up like that."

So I'd been told we only had three more days to go! I didn't waste any time finishing the meal and getting away to my eight-by-six. I had an hour to spare before sick-bay, and I wanted to be by myself. To think.

I bolted the door, and took off my uniform blouse, and sat on the edge of my bunk. I lit a cigarette and started thinking, letting the thoughts come any way they hit. The majority of them, the ones about ending the voyage, were good. The others, about what we'd have to go through before it ended, were bad. I found myself trying to strike a balance between the intense excitement of looking forward to landing on an unknown planet, and my terror at having to go through the ordeal of deceleration before we entered what Quinn and the others called the System's FI, or Field of Influence.

In their space-crew slang, the period of acceleration was the Jig, and the period of deceleration, the Jag. And when I looked back at what I'd felt like when I went through the first, just thinking about the second seemed to turn my bones into water. Especially since, from what I'd picked up from the others, the *Jag* was reckoned the tougher of the two . . .

The balance was coming out on the wrong side, and I was getting more and more scared every minute. On a sudden impulse, I got up from the bunk and crossed to the other wall and pressed the switch of the exterior viewer . . .

It was only the second time in the year's journey that I'd done it. After the first time, I'd sworn to myself I'd never do it again. Not voluntarily anyway. Because what had happened to me shouldn't happen to a Martian. It wasn't awesome, like the Jig, but it was bad enough. It was nausea, but with a capital N. It was space-sickness—something most of the boys got over early in their careers, but something I didn't even want to give myself the chance of getting over.

However, now I had a reason to try it again. It might make me so glad to be nearly at the end of the trip and out of Space again that the Jag would seem less frightening.

The screen of the viewer blurred, darkened, began to throb with that inner glow it gets as it warms up . . . The glow faded—and the thing looked like a window, as if the whole double hull behind it had somehow dissolved.

And outside the window was blackness. Not like any blackness on Earth—or on any other planet. But a blackness with the terrifying solidity of Nothing . . . Even worse, it was Nothing in motion. The impression that the ship was stationary grew stronger, because the Nothingness seemed to be spinning, hurtling past at unbelievable speed. I know those words don't make sense if you analyze them—but that's the only way I can describe what it was like.

My head began to swim, but I leaned forward, gripping the beveled edges of the screen. I forced myself to keep on staring out—and the swimming sensation faded . . .

But only until the lights began. They were outside the blackness, which was now like a tunnel whose walls had suddenly become transparent. They were impossible lights, shapeless and streaked, scrawling aimless and ugly patterns against the black.

And because I knew they were stars and it was our unthinkable speed, faster than their light rays, which was distorting them to my eyes, I was suddenly wrenched into awareness it was the ship—the

ship and therefore I myself—that was moving . . . My head and stomach rebelled. Sick and reeling, only just saving myself from vomiting there and then, I managed to flip off the switch and stagger back to the bunk . . .

Although I still felt shaky, I was all right again in a few minutes. But looking out hadn't done me any good. I was still terrified of the Jag—in some illogical way even more terrified than before . . .

III

The hours passed—twenty-six of them. I'd just finished my morning stint of work, when the 'Attention All Hands' signal came over the communicator, followed by John Adams' voice.

"Now hear this," it said in the ancient formula. "Now hear this: A General Order to all hands. Shortly, the Artificial Gravity Field will be inoperative. Secure all gear—secure all gear. Section Chiefs report individually when through. That is all."

So here it was, H-hour. Which in a little while would be M-minute!

In fifteen of the minutes I'd cleaned up, watched a couple of Hands turn on all the clamping switches in the surgery, and taken myself back to my eight-by-six, hoping I didn't look as green as I felt.

The cabin door was open—and going in, I found the Bosun there, fixing the magnetic clamp switches. I liked the Bosun, and I'd often wished that instead of being a Warrant Officer, he'd been up with me and Adams and Quinn and Farman. Maybe it was because he was a veteran; he must have been all of thirty-two. Anyway, we'd always gotten along very well, particularly after I'd cured him of what he thought was chronic dyspepsia.

He looked at me and sketched a salute. "Thought I'd see to your cabin m'self, sir," he said.

I said, "Thanks very much." I wished he wasn't there. Cold sweat was beginning to roll off my forehead, and I had to pull out a handkerchief and mop at it. I tried to cover up by pulling out cigarettes and offering him one. I said, "Have a smoke—and don't be so official."

He grinned and took a cigarette. He said, "Don't you worry, Doc. It ain't pleasant—but it's soon over."

I said ruefully, "Do I look as bad as that?"

"I seen worse." He went past me to the bunk and tilted it into the right position for the Jag, and secured it and pulled out the broad

webbing straps. He looked at me again. He wasn't smiling this time. He said, "One thing, Doc: for a Jag, you gotta strap yourself real tight."

"I'll make a note of it," I said. I tried a smile, but it couldn't have been very successful, because he suddenly reached out a hand and patted me on the shoulder.

"Take it easy," he said. "Take it easy."

He went out, closing the door behind him.

I lit a cigarette and walked up and down the cabin, four steps each way. I thought the time was dragging, but it only seemed a couple of minutes before the shrill whistle of the 'All Hands' signal came over my communicator.

"Now hear this," came Adams' voice. "All hands to DC stations—all hands to DC stations. Section chiefs report compliance. That is all."

It wasn't only my forehead that was sweating now. I was wet all over. I leaned back against the tilted bunk and braced my feet against the rests and started to fasten the leg straps. The soft woven plastic felt cold and slippery in my fingers.

The door opened and the Bosun whipped in. I said, "Hi, there—" and didn't even try to smile this time.

"Only gotta coupla minutes." He pushed me back against the bunk. "No time for gab." He finished strapping my legs—so tight that I began to wonder about circulation. He started on the main body strap, and I groaned and began to complain. And then thought better of it and shut up.

When he'd finished with me I could hardly breathe. "Grab them hand-holds now," he said. "Grip like you was tryin' to bend 'em." He fished in his pocket and pulled out two little things I couldn't identify. "These'll help some," he said and bent over me and inserted one of them into each of my ears. He looked down at me for a second—and suddenly grinned.

Then he was gone. A few minutes or years or seconds later I heard —faintly because of the ear plugs—the whistle of the communicator. Three blasts this time—with no voice to follow them . . .

There was a lull—and then the Jag began . . .

The first step was a violent, somehow convulsive shuddering which shook the whole fabric of the ship until the thought stabbed through my mind that something was wrong, that some part of the infinitely intricate machine had failed.

Against the cruel tightness of the straps my body was forced forward until I thought the plastic would sink deep into my flesh.

Then came the Noise. In spite of the earplugs it seemed to go right through my head like a white-hot scalpel. A sort of apotheosis of sound, which came from tortured metal strained to the very limit of its endurance.

Then everything—the Noise and the shuddering vibration and the cutting of the straps—it all seemed to merge together and be inside me. I felt as if my whole being—and I mean more than my body—were fighting against a force determined on my utter disintegration . . .

Then—nothingness . . . Until I came back together and felt hands working on the straps around my legs.

It was the Bosun. He was standing normally, and I knew the A.G.F. was on again. As he undid the body straps, I managed to croak some words at him. He probably couldn't make them out, but he knew what I was trying to say.

He said, "You can quit worryin', Doc. We're through—everything's all terrashape . . ."

IV

It wasn't long before I'd stripped off my sodden clothes and put on a fresh uniform and made my way to the Mess. Except for a headache, and a weak feeling around my knees, I felt pretty good. But I needed a drink—badly.

I wasn't the only one, because Farman was there, halfway through a powerful concoction he always called a Spacehound Special. My heart sank when I saw him; I didn't feel like being ribbed.

But I needn't have worried. For once, it seemed, Jerry Farman didn't feel like pulling legs. He said, "Hi, Doc," and raised his glass. And then he said, "That was one tough Jag, all right!" He pulled out his cheeks. "Thought I was never coming together again."

That made me feel better. I said, "So did I," and mixed myself a drink and drained half of it at one gulp. "My legs are the worst," I said. "They don't feel right, somehow."

Farman said, "That's not you, Doc. That's the ship. It's the difference in speed." He emptied his glass and set it down and started out. But he checked at the door and turned. He said, "Like to come up in the Control Area? Quite a thrill to look in the big peeper now."

I grabbed at the opportunity eagerly, so eagerly that I left half my drink untasted and in less than a minute was following Farman along

to the Control Area. Adams was in the pilot's chair, but his eyes were on the eight-foot screen of the big viewer. He didn't move when we came in, but Quinn saw us and jumped up. He said, "Ah!" and licked his lips thirstily. He looked at me and said, "Sit in my place if you like, Doctor," and brushed past me and was gone.

Adams spoke to Farman, still without looking around. He said, "Give me a fix, Jerry, Right away."

"Check," said Farman and slid into his seat in front of the huge astro-globe swinging gently in its transparent case. Quinn's chair was a little apart from the Pilot's and the Astrogator's, beside the two banks of computers. I slipped into it and swung it round and looked across at the screen of the viewer.

And let out a startled exclamation. Gone was all that sensation of being stationary in a moving Cosmos. Now—I could feel it!—the ship was moving, heading like an arrow toward one single blazing star that hung in the blackness ahead . . .

Altair—an impossible, blazing jewel hung on an impossible curtain of the blackest impossible velvet . . .

V

Hours later—about 1800 by our time—I was in the Control Area once more. I'd been in the Surgery, fixing for the mandatory pre-arrival check-up, but I'd sneaked back as soon as I could, to find Quinn had gone to the Relay chamber. So I slid into his chair again . . .

And saw something which made my first view of Altair, which had so impressed me, seem almost insignificant. When I first sat down, the only difference I could see was that the jewel-like star was nearer and therefore larger—but presently, as I watched, other and smaller jewels began to thrust through the black velvet all around the great central stone. And each jewel seemed to my fascinated eyes to be a different color.

They were stars—and it was like watching them being born. The fact that I knew they were other, farther away members of a constellation which had been existing since the beginning of Time made no difference to the exquisite sensation of watching them, for me, come into being . . .

I don't know how long I sat there, fascinated, but at last Quinn came back and they almost dragged me out of the chair—and Adams and I left the Control room and had some sort of a meal, after which I went to bed.

But not to sleep. Adams had told me that by our morning we'd be in sight of the Altair planets, and I was too excited to do much more than doze sporadically.

During the last of the dozes, I was brought wide awake by a shrill whistle from the communicator, and then Adams' voice calling all hands to General Assembly.

I pulled on clothes and hurried along to the men's mess, where all Assemblies were held. I took my place in the front row, with Farman and Quinn. Behind us were the Bosun and the two non-coms. Behind them were the rest of the crew. There were twenty of us. John Adams wasn't there yet, in accordance with the unwritten protocol which seems to provide that Commanders must always keep everybody waiting.

I looked around, and thought for the thousandth time how young all the faces were. Young, that is, in flesh and coloring, in cellular tissue. But in another way, not young at all but tough and weathered by experience. From this, I got onto my old line of thought about the new breed these children constituted.

Then Adams arrived. He stood at the end of the mess room and looked us over. He was saturnine and controlled as ever, and it occurred to me that he was even more representative of the new breed than any of the others. Perhaps this was because he seemed somehow, in spite of his very definite good looks, sort of ageless, with more self-recognized force and control than his twenty-seven years or so could conceivably have given him in any other walk of life.

"You all know why you're here," he said at last. "To be told, in accordance with Standing Orders, what this trip's about. Personally, I think this way of not telling a crew what a mission's about until they've reached the objective—well, I think it's damn silly. Outdated as rocket propulsion. I think you ought to've been told, not only where we are going, but why." One of his rare smiles came here. "But if any of you space-bugs quotes me, I'll have him on Charge for maligning an officer."

There was a ripple of laughter, and he went on, "We're headed for the fourth planet of Altair, as you all know. If Lt. Farman's as good an Astrogator as he says he is—" another laugh—"we ought to be settling down in twenty-four hours." He paused a moment. "We don't know anything about this planet. We are on Reconn. Object: to find out what's happened to Exploratory Mission Eighty-three. This mission left Earth Base twenty years ago, Earth time. The ship was the E-X Craft 101, *Bellerophon*. She carried the usual mixed crew of scientists, technicians and guards. The expedition was the first to the constellation Alpha Aquilae."

He ran his eye over us again. “Nobody knows what’s happened to *Bellerophon*. Or the expedition. We don’t even know if they landed on Altair-4 at all. This is because any form of radio communication over this distance is damn near impossible even today, and the *Bellerophon*’s equipment was twenty years older than ours . . .

“So there you are: our job’s to find out if the *Bellerophon* made it, and if she did, what’s happened to the crew. Don’t forget the time-squeeze: if they survived, we’re in for an interesting visit. Because they’ll have spent twenty years on a planet man’s never touched before . . .”

And that was all. He dismissed the Assembly and hurried back to the Control room, taking Farman with him. He was noted among the crew, especially the older hands like my friend the Bosun, for hating to leave his ship under unsupervised Automatic Control. They liked it. To them it was the mark of a really good Commander.

As I made for the door, I found Quinn beside me. I liked Alonzo Quinn, in spite of his precise, rather old-maidish manner—which, I was beginning to believe, derived mainly from his profession. After all, a Devisor has to be a fuss-budget to do his job properly.

I said, “I suppose it’s different for you old hands, but for me this is all pretty exciting.”

He studied me through his large glasses. “Eminently understandable, Doctor.”

“I don’t see much sleep for me tonight,” I said. “Too many things to wonder about.”

“May I strongly advise against ‘wondering’,” said Alonzo Quinn. “The more mental forecasts you make, the greater the shocks you’re likely to get . . .”

VI

Adams’ prediction that twenty-four hours would see the end of our journey looked like being a hundred per cent correct. Because some time in the small hours I was waked from a thin sleep by the whistle of the communicator—and then, oddly, Farman’s voice. It said:

“Hear this: Lieutenant Farman speaking for the Commander. Our objective, Altair-4, is in sight. All hands not on duty—repeat, not on duty may use the deck-2 viewers. The planet and satellites are visible on the port side. That is all.”

I was out of bed and across to my viewer in one jump. I flipped the

switch—and waited impatiently while it clouded, glowed—and cleared . . .

Strangely, my first reaction was one of disappointment. It looked so small, hanging there like some Christmas decoration right in the middle of my screen. And there was nothing strange (God knows what pictures my mind had been conjuring up!) about its shape. Except that its general contour was a little more squeezed at the ends, a little more ovate, it looked pretty much like Earth.

But then I began to realize how beautiful it was. And strange, too, with its atmosphere spreading a turquoise-shimmering halo; with its two small greenish moons whose tint was like no tint I'd ever seen before . . .

I must have stood there for an hour, watching while our speed brought the planet closer and closer, swelling it until it filled the viewer completely . . .

I was brought to myself by a visit from the Bosun. " 'Mornin', Doc," he said. "Commander's compliments—and if you'd like to go up to Control you're welcome." He grinned at me as I jumped for my clothes. "Gettin' quite a jet outa this, huh, Doc?"

"Why wouldn't I?" I pulled on my blouse and buttoned it feverishly. "If you want to know what *I* think, this blase attitude you Spacehogs cultivate's just a pose."

He looked at me, his grin fading. "Could be," he said. "Maybe we had too much experience. Maybe we cover up because we're scared."

There was something about his tone, and I looked up quickly from putting on my shoes. But all I saw was his back as he went out the door . . .

Up in Control, I found Adams and Farman and Quinn all at their places. But the big viewer was blank. I didn't understand why it had been switched off until Adams pulled the communicator mike toward him and said into it, "Hear this: Commander to Crew. We are about to enter the F.I. of our objective. All hands to D.C. Stations. All hands to D.C. Stations. That is all."

I understood then. We were about to go through what they called a second-grade deceleration as we pierced the envelope of the planet's atmosphere. I didn't mind. I'd had this in training; it wasn't anything like a Jag. Farman and Quinn went over to the row of huge D.C. lamps at the edge of the area, and I followed with Adams close behind me. I crossed to my station at the end of the row and stepped up onto the platform under the lamp. The others stood on their platforms, Adams last.

Almost immediately the ship shuddered, the lights flickered and

then dimmed, and the ship's bell began to count in measured beeps. Simultaneously, the odd varicolored Omega rays from the lamps above our heads poured down over us. I had a numb, powerless feeling all over, and began to feel sick at my stomach.

The bell stopped. The lights went up, and the D.C. lamps cut themselves off automatically. I stepped down from my platform. My neck was stiff, and I still felt a little queasy. But that was all. I said, "I wish they'd get those lamps up to a point where they'd look after a Jag," but no-one paid any attention. Adams and Farman were already back in their seats, and Quinn brushed past me to go to an apparatus I remembered was the short distance radio control.

Then someone must have switched on the viewer again—because the screen glowed and flickered, warming up.

And suddenly Altair-4 filled the screen like a huge relief map, one whole hemisphere bathed in the light of its sun-star, Altair. The light was still the strange blue-green, as if it had been filtered through a turquoise screen, and it had an astonishing quality of clarity . . .

I was fascinated, my whole consciousness seemed to be in my eyes, so that all my mind could do was receive impressions. It was like being under hypnosis, and I've no idea at all how long it lasted.

When I did start thinking again, the first thought was a surprised one. Because of the increasing likeness of the planet to Earth. Here was no grey-white, crater-pitted Lunar waste; no red, canal-scarred Martian monotony. Here were plains and oceans, rivers and mountain ranges—and no single overriding coloration but every imaginable—and some unimaginable—shade, and gradation of shade . . .

I suddenly wanted to talk about it. To somebody, anybody. I looked away from the screen for the first time, and at once was aware of tension, Nobody had moved, nobody seemed to be doing anything, but there was an atmosphere of strain which was almost tangible.

Adams spoke suddenly, and I almost jumped out of my skin. He said, "Still nothing, Lon?" and Quinn shook his head without looking around. I saw he had on his head an oddly-shaped pair of earphones. He said, "Nothing, Skipper. I thought there was a moment or so back, but it was only static." I could see the frown behind his spectacles. "Peculiar static—but static nevertheless . . ."

Farman looked up. "Going to take a whirl at the other hemisphere, Skipper?"

"Why the hurry?" Adams was curt. He looked at Quinn again. "Keep at it, Lon," he said, and turned back to his Pilot controls.

I felt thoroughly ashamed of myself. Here I'd been in a trance of excitement over my own sensations, while all the time the others were

thinking about the men we'd come to find.

Now I couldn't think of anything else, and only darted occasional glances at the screen to see what Adams was doing with the ship. He seemed to be coming down, very slowly, and coursing in wide spirals at the same time . . .

Half an hour went by, maybe an hour. And still we had no success. Quinn's frown was deeper, Adams' mouth a grim line. Even Farman looked worn and harassed. Once I thought we had something. They had switched on the big speaker now, over the Pilot's chair—and, suddenly, sounds had come out of it. Strange sounds. They were like—well, like nothing in my experience.

But Quinn said they were static—and he was the expert. He had to be right . . .

The time dragged on. The spirals brought us lower, but very slowly. At a word from Adams, Farman slipped on a pair of the new I.M. goggles, and stood up close to the viewer screen, studying it.

"Not a sign of mass habitation, Skipper. Not a city, not a bridge, not a dam." His schoolboy grin came back for a moment. "Not a damn thing, in fact." The grin faded. "I could be missing isolated structures, but they'd have to be pretty small."

Adams growled, "Keep looking." I think he was going to say more, but he didn't get the chance. Because Quinn cut in, sharply:

"Skipper—Skipper! We're being radar-scanned. Sequence K!"

From the big speaker came a sudden raucous cackling, and Quinn's whole body tensed as he shot out a hand to one of the dials and adjusted it with feverish caution.

The cackling stopped—and a resonant, metallic voice came from the big speaker.

". . . being scanned . . ." it said.

It was like an impossible echo of Quinn, and it brought me out of my seat. I stared up at the mouth of the speaker. Adams and Farman were staring too. Quinn said something—but none of us heard him as the voice came again.

It was slow and low and measured. It said, "Space Ship, identify yourself. You are being scanned . . . Space Ship, identify yourself. You are being scanned . . ."

Adams grabbed for his microphone. "This is United Planets Cruiser C-57-D, John Adams Commander. Who are you?"

There was a pause, a long one. And there was a subtle change in the metallic voice when it spoke. As if its words came reluctantly:

“This is Morbius speaking.”

Farman set down an open paper on the ledge in front of Adams’ chair.

Adams glanced at the paper. “Edward Morbius?” he said. “Of the *Bellerophon*?”

“That is correct,” came the voice—and said nothing more.

Adams and Farman exchanged a glance. They were as puzzled as I was. The man’s reaction to this first contact with Earth in what must have been, for him, a couple of decades, seemed all wrong.

Adams said, “It’s good to know the *Bellerophon* made it, Doctor Morbius.” He was trying to hit the proper note.

There was another pause. And then, “Do you contemplate a landing, Commander?” Now there was no mistaking the coldness in the voice.

“What else?” Adams said. “You don’t seem to understand, Doctor. My mission’s solely concerned with the *Bellerophon* party. To report on their present state. And relieve them if necessary.”

There was more than a pause this time. There was a silence so long that Adams looked at Quinn and said, “Still on?”

Quinn nodded definitely, and Adams turned back to his microphone. He said, “Look, Doctor Morbius—are you under duress of any kind? You answer Yes or No, and I’ll do the talking.”

This brought instant response. “There is no question of duress, Commander.” Now the tone was harsh and incisive. “There is no need for assistance of any kind. It is unnecessary to land. In fact, it is inadvisable.” There was a pause now. “It might, indeed, be disastrous.”

Adams said, picking his words, “My orders—I repeat, my orders—are to land on Altair-4 and survey the situation.”

“A Space Commander’s orders must always be subject to his discretion.” The voice was harsher still, and louder. “I repeat, it is unnecessary for you to land. I also repeat that it might be disastrous.”

Adams said, “My discretion follows the same line as my Orders.” He was flat, deliberate. “I’d like co-ordinates for a landing. As near you as possible.” While he talked he scribbled something on a pad, passing it to Farman.

Farman got up quickly, taking the pad to Quinn. I could guess it was an order to try and trace the location of the other radio.

“Commander,” said the voice. “If you set down on this planet I cannot be answerable for the safety of your ship. Or its crew.” There was a tremor in the sound. It might have been anger, or fear.

Adams said, “I’m going to put down, Doctor Morbius. What’s the nature of this danger?”

Silence. Farman brushed past me, and I caught a glimpse of the pad again. Quinn had written, “Narrowed to square approx 50 terramiles.”

Farman thrust the pad in front of Adams. Who glanced at it; then spoke into the transmitter. “I’ll repeat, Doctor Morbius. What is the nature of this danger?”

This time there was an answer. It was oddly hesitant. “It cannot be—adequately described. There are no terms—”

Adams cut in, “Then give me the co-ordinates for landing. As a senior member of the Expedition, you’re required to know them.”

“You understand I shall disclaim responsibility? For anything that may happen to you.” The tremor was back in the voice, definitely a tremor of anger this time.

“The co-ordinates please.”

We heard a sound which can only have been a sigh. And then, “I have the log here, and our Astrogator’s figures . . .”

Adams made a sign to Quinn, who went quickly over to him. Farman, pad and pencil ready, bent closer. The voice began to call off figures interspersed with technical phrases. They had no meaning for me—but Farman was copying them down, with Quinn studying the pad over his shoulder.

“That is all,” said the voice. Adams shot a quick glance at Quinn, who was now rapidly figuring in a notebook of his own.

Adams stalled. “I’ll check back,” he said into the transmitter, and began to read from the pad. He had almost finished when Quinn looked up, nodded decisively.

Adams came to the end, and the voice said, “Perfectly correct, Commander.” Again we heard that unmistakable sigh.

There was silence after it. It was a different sort of silence from the others, and Quinn jumped back to his controls. He fiddled with dials for a moment, but then looked up and shook his head. “Cut off,” he said.

Nobody spoke for a moment, and then Farman said, “Not what you’d call a red carpet welcome, huh?”

Adams looked at Quinn. “Those co-ords did check with your trace figures?”

“Definitely.” Quinn was very sure. “Almost exactly in the middle of my fifty-mile square.”

“What were you thinking, Skipper?” Farman asked. “That Morbius

might be bringing us down in the wrong place?"

"Or in the middle of trouble," Adams said. To my surprise he glanced over at me. I thought he'd forgotten my existence. "What did you think of that voice, Doc? Occur to you he might be off his beam?"

"No," I said. "No, it didn't." I pondered. "Emotional-swinging between anger and fear. That's what I thought—"

"Fear?" Adams pounced on the word. "For himself?"

"I don't think so." I shrugged. "I'm only guessing, of course. Seemed to me he was genuinely afraid on your account. The anger was because you refused to take his say-so."

Quinn said, "Skipper, what did you mean when you asked if he might be under duress?"

"Just that," Adams said. "Why shouldn't there be—intelligent native life down there?" He sat back, half-closing his eyes, weighing everything in his mind.

It didn't take him long. He sat up and looked at Jerry Farman and snapped, "Punch out a course from those figures," and switched to Quinn. "Lon, get busy on atmosphere and grav. tests as we lose altitude." He swiveled his chair and switched on the communicator and picked up its mike.

"Commander to crew," he said into it. "Commander to crew. Now hear this: We are going to land on our objective. Until further orders the ship is on B-Alert. Repeat—from now until further orders, B-Alert, Bosun: report to Control Area when Alert complete. That is all."

He switched off the communicator and looked at me. Farman was already busy feeding figures to his computer, Quinn intent on his control banks.

"Alert-B," Adams snapped. "That doesn't stop your pre-landing check, Major."

I muttered an apology, and got myself out of there in double time and made for the surgery. It had no viewer, but that didn't matter. I was too busy anyway . . .

Some time after I'd passed the last man, another order came from Adams, and some crumbs of information. Over the communicator, his voice was clipped and flat:

"Now hear this: The ship will be on A-Alert from the moment this message ends. On A-Alert from the time this message ends. We are preparing to set down. Tests show this is a Terra-type planet. Atmosphere and gravity don't—repeat, do not—call for suits or helmets. Dress will be Field Order Two, with arms. Bosun, report to Control Area when A-Alert complete. That is all."

I hurried to my eight-by-six to change . . .

TWO

Major (Medical) C. X. Ostrow (Continued)

We were down. We'd landed on Altair-4.

We were ready for anything—but it didn't seem to be happening.

Like some huge impossible mushroom growth, the ship squatted on her landing gear. With the turquoise-tinted light gleaming on her hull, she seemed to loom even bigger and sleeker than she had on the day, ten Earth-years and countless millions of miles ago, when I'd caught my first sight of her at the launching base.

Inside her, men were stationed at her blast and disintegrator guns, the open gun-ports making black holes in her glittering flanks. Outside, the rest of the hands, all armed, were spread in a protective circle. Some little way beyond the circle were the Officers—and, much to my delighted surprise, I was with them. I'd been afraid that, as we were still on Alert-A and ready for trouble, I was going to be ordered to stay aboard, in the Surgery. But I hadn't been, thank God.

And—thank God again—no one was interfering with me. Adams, binoculars at his eyes, was making a slow and careful survey of the horizon. Farman was pacing up and down, dragging at a cigarette. Quinn, on hands and knees, seemed lost in examination of the sandy soil. I was on my own—and very lucky. The others had to think, but I didn't. I could let them do the worrying and give myself up to my senses and try to absorb the strangeness . . .

It took some absorbing. Gone entirely was the feeling of similarity to Earth. We were on a desert, with a sun beating down on us. There was air we could breathe and sand we could walk on. There were vistas our eyes could see, and we could hear the crunching of our boots as we moved. But nothing was the same; nothing was even remotely Earthlike . . .

But I felt—wonderful. I drew in deep breaths of the soft, heady air. I looked up at the turquoise sky, and down at the red sand, I looked around at the weird stalagmitic spears of blue-grey rock which thrust up through the sand in haphazard clusters, and then I looked past them and out around the horizon at the ranges of jagged green-grey

mountains on one side and the gentler slopes on the other; slopes which, shimmering in the glare, might be clothed in vegetation . . .

I was startled by Quinn's voice from close beside me. It said, "Look at this, Doctor," and I turned to see him holding out to me a chunk of the blue-grey rock.

"An extraordinary formation," he said. "Harder than granite, but lighter than pumice!"

I stretched out my hand for the thing—but never finished the gesture. Because from behind me came a shout in Adams' voice:

"Bosun! Alert—your left front!"

I whipped around and saw that Adams was pointing out across the red desert. Miles away in the middle distance, a dark cloud of sand was whirling toward us at tremendous speed. I told myself it might be some trick of wind, like a 'dust-devil' in Arizona, but somehow I knew it wasn't.

I heard the Bosun barking orders—and saw four of the crewmen move up to stand level with Adams. After that, none of us moved. Or spoke.

The sand-cloud whirled on, making straight for us—and I saw, inside or perhaps just ahead of it, something from which the light struck metallic gleams.

The speed was so great that, in a matter of seconds, it was almost up to us—whatever it was—and decelerating with a smooth violence which raised the dust-cloud even higher. It came to a stop about twenty yards from where we stood, and a crewman on the right of Adams suddenly brought his blast gun up to his shoulder. The Bosun roared at him, and the man pulled the weapon down to the ready with a convulsive jerk. I couldn't help sympathizing with him, though: there had been something—there was still something—about the swift, rushing approach which had tightened every muscle in my stomach.

The dust died down—and we found ourselves looking at what was obviously a vehicle. It had odd, frail-looking wheels, and seemed to be made of metal and plastic. Perhaps fifteen feet long, it was a weird, clumsy shape. In front, towering above the rest, was an amorphous mass of metal from the top of which came occasional stabs of light. Behind this, the flat, sled-like body had four seats protected by cone-shaped windscreens. But the seats were unoccupied—and, in front of me Farman muttered, "The damn thing's empty!"

I heard myself saying, "That must be the—the engine in front. But where's the driver?"

Adams said sharply, “Shut up. Watch.”

And I saw that the whole towering bulk of what I had taken for engine, the source of power, was in motion. It was rising, growing taller . . .

And it—it stepped down from the vehicle, leaving only the flat platform. The source of power, it seemed, was also the manipulator of the power . . .

It was erect—a bulbous shape some seven feet high and constructed like a mad infant’s drawing of a man, with the mass of it contained in the body. Below the body were two stumpy, stilt-like legs and projecting from the upper part, at the shoulders, two arm-like projections. The head was a dome-like excrescence, and it was from this that the stabs of light were coming . . .

The thing turned and began, slowly and ponderously, to walk toward us. The Bosun drew closer to Adams and said something, and Adams barked, “No!” decisively. “It’s got no weapon I can see.”

Jerry Farman said, “Could be a weapon, Skipper,” but Adams only made a gesture for silence.

We stood still, watching the thing plod close and closer. It had a curious, rolling gait—and I could see the leg-like projections were articulated.

It stopped, fronting us, about fifteen feet away. The front of the headpiece was louvred, and through the louvres lights were flashing. More brightly now, and in a pattern. A grating noise came from inside the metal shell—

And the thing spoke. The sound was a metallic monotone, but speech nevertheless.

I was so astonished that I missed the first two or three words. But I heard, “. . . welcome. I am to take the Commander and Officers to Doctor Morbius.”

On the last word, everything stopped. The lights were cut off. And the voice. And the grating sound which had gone with it.

It was as if the thing had died. Now it just stood there, a crudely shaped, inanimate hunk of dark metal.

An excited babble burst from Quinn as he gripped Adams by the arm. I caught the words, “. . . Robot . . . remote control—” and then he stopped. Fascinated, he dropped his hand from the Skipper’s arm and started forward.

But Adams reached out and grabbed his shoulder and pulled him roughly back. He staggered momentarily, then stood very still, shooting a baleful glance at Adams that I’d never have thought him

capable of.

Farman was talking now. "Robot!" he was saying contemptuously. "Whoever saw one like that? Except in a kid's viddy-strip." I knew he was thinking how different this was from the hundreds of sleek, box-like robot-machines that were coming more and more into use at home. But in the back of my mind I was haunted by a memory I couldn't pin down. Something to do with Robot. Not the fact, but the word itself . . .

The lights behind the louvres began to flash again. And the grating sound came, and then the voice.

"I am to inform you," it clanged, "I am monitored to react to word Robby."

And then the thing died again. No lights, no sound.

"Hear that, Lonnie?" Adams looked at Quinn. "You want to make some tests?"

"After you, sir." Our Chief Devisor and Engineer was sulking.

Adams shrugged. He took a pace forward and stared at the hunk of metal and said slowly, "Robby—can you understand me?"

The lights winked on. "Yes." The monosyllable clanged, and the voice stopped. But this time some of the lights stayed. In a steady pattern now, with no blinking and changing.

Adams said, "Do I have to use the monitor word every time I speak to you?"

"No." The light-pattern was shifting again.

"You are"—Adams hesitated—"you're a Robot machine?"

"Yes. Word Robby is contraction."

"You're under the control of Doctor Morbius?"

"Yes." At the word 'Morbius' the pattern-change of the lights was. very fast. "I am to take Commander and Officers to Doctor Morbius."

There was a silence then, and in it I heard myself speaking. I was saying, "My God—it thinks! Does everyone realize that? It thinks!"

Quinn said, "We don't know that, Doctor. Not yet." His anger, if it had lasted, was confining itself to Adams. "All we've seen is reaction and selectivity. From a basic bank." His eyes were fixed on the Robot with the flaming curiosity of the expert.

Farman said, "Some bank! Ask it another, Skipper."

Adams, lost in thought, growled something which might have been, "Ask it yourself—" and Farman looked at me and said, "You take a shot, Doc. I can't think of anything."

I stepped a pace forward, with half an eye on Adams. But he didn't pay any attention. I looked at the Robot and said, "Robby—" and then realized I hadn't thought of anything either.

The thing's lights cut off, for a flick of time, then came on again. I guessed it was distinguishing between me and Adams. I said, "Robby—the atmosphere on this planet—it must be very rich in oxygen—" and then dried up.

"Oxygen content of air," said the metallic voice, "is 4.7 above Terrapoint."

"Jeez-us!" Farman grabbed at my arm. "That wasn't even a question you gave it!" He stepped in front of me and looked at the Robot and raised his voice. He said:

"Hey, Robby—" and again I saw the lights cut off and then come on immediately—"Whadda we call you? Mister or Missus?"

There was a snicker from the crewmen: this was Farman all over, turning everything into a gag. I glared at him, and so did Quinn, who snarled, "If you think you're going to get an answer to that—" and then stopped short, gaping.

"Question not intelligible," said the metal voice. "Sex references inapplicable."

There was a pause—and then a shout of laughter from the men. "That's telling him!" said an anonymous voice from one of the flanking guards, and Farman grinned. A trifle ruefully, I thought.

He looked at the Robot again, and said, "All right—so you're cute. Now answer this one—"

He swallowed the last words as Adams suddenly came out of his reverie. "Quit the foolery, Lieutenant," he snapped. "And step back."

Farman gulped. He said, "Yes, sir," and stepped back smartly and was quiet. The men were quiet, too. There'd been something in the Skipper's tone, and I was suddenly conscious again of the situation we were in. And its unpleasant possibilities.

Adams stepped closer to the Robot. He said, "Robby: this danger Doctor Morbius spoke about? What is it?"

The reply was definitely longer in coming than any of the others had been, and I noticed again a very fast changing and rechanging of the light-patterns.

"Question not understood," said the metal voice at last. "Please reframe."

Adams said, very slowly, "What is the danger referred to by Doctor Morbius?"

The reaction to this was startling. The grating sound which always seemed to accompany speech rose to a high-pitched whine, and the lights flashed crazily. And then, as the sound stopped abruptly, they went out. And the thing was dead again.

Farman muttered, “What’s it done—blown a fuse?” And then, before anyone else had spoken, the lights came on again in the bulbous headpiece. I thought they were in the same simple pattern as they’d been at the start, but I couldn’t be certain.

The thing said, “I am to take Commander and Officers to Doctor Morbius.” Exactly as it had at first.

Adams turned his back on it. He walked away a few paces, beckoning to Farman and Quinn, and then to me. We followed and stood around him and he said, “Two of us’ll go. Me and Jerry. Lon, you’ll be in command here. As we leave, get back in the ship, and keep a track on me all the time.” He tapped at the small glittering cylinder on his audio-video set; it was clipped to his belt and looked almost like part of the buckle.

“Okay, Skipper,” Quinn had obviously recovered from his pique.

Adams said, “Leave sentries outside. Keep the two big blast-guns manned. And have the tractor assembled right away; in case you have to come after us.”

“Right,” said Quinn—and Adams said, “Any comments?” and looked at each of us in turn.

Farman and Quinn shook their heads. But I said, “Excuse me, Skipper, but you don’t quite know what you and Jerry might run into, do you?”

Adams said., “Your guess is as good as mine, Doc.”

I said, “But it could be trouble, obviously—”

“So?”

“So I think three’s a better number than two,” I said. “And I’m not decrepit. And I have a hundred-eighty rating with this—” I touched the holster of my D-R pistol—“and there’s nothing much I could help Lonnie with on the ship—”

I didn’t have to finish, because Adams grinned one of his fleeting grins. “All right,” he said. “All right!” The grin faded fast, and he looked at Quinn again. “That’s it, then.”

“Right,” said Quinn, and added, “Good luck.” And then was off. I heard him shout to the Bosun as I followed Adams and Farman back to where the Robot stood.

I caught up with them as Adams stopped a few feet from the thing. He said, “Robby—” and the lights came on in their first pattern

—"we're ready to go to Doctor Morbius."

"Thank you," clanked the metal voice. "Follow please." The Robot turned and started, at its long lumbering stride, back toward its vehicle.

As we followed, I turned and looked back. With the exception of three sentries, there was no one to be seen now. The bright ship still squatted like an alien growth on the red sand, with the green-blue light shimmering on her hull and the blue-grey pinnacles of rock thrusting themselves up in clusters all around her. It was all there—and all real—and all completely improbable.

And, to cap all improbabilities, here was I, Charles Xavier Ostrow, about to drive away over the unlikely desert, in a preposterous jaunting car piloted by a mechanical caricature of a human, in company with two hard-faced youngsters and heading for something, someone, some place and situation about which none of us knew anything . . .

II

That was quite a trip. Our watches said it took less than fifteen minutes, but it seemed a great deal longer than that. Maybe because I had my eyes shut half the time.

We started, with tremendous acceleration which made me thank God for the safety belts we'd found on the seats, heading straight across the desert for the mountains. But the desert, we found very quickly, wasn't as flat as it had looked from the ship. What we hadn't seen was a depression which hid a tremendous cleft, half a mile across and ten times that in depth, which ran parallel to the way we were going. This was when I first shut my eyes, because the Robot drove, without any slackening of the terrific speed, directly along the lip of the chasm, so that it didn't seem there could be more than six inches between our wheels and extinction . . .

When I opened my eyes—cautiously—I saw we were past the chasm and heading straight for a sort of rocky escarpment which shot abruptly out of the red earth between us and the mountains. The sheet of blue-grey rock seemed to stretch for miles on either side, towering perhaps a hundred feet above the floor of the desert. There was no break in it that I could see, yet we were hurtling straight at it. At a speed I hated even to guess.

I shut my eyes again.

There was a rushing interval, then a faint deceleration followed by

the sharp swing of a curve. I heard one of the others say something. It sounded like an exclamation, and I risked another peek—and exclaimed myself.

There must have been an opening in the wall of rock, because now we were on the other side of it and rolling much slower down a gentle slope toward a broad valley which had the rock as one side of it and the foot of a mountain as the other. And we might have been a thousand miles from any desert, because here, stretching out as far as we could see, were trees and shrubs and grassland, even the placid glimmering of a narrow river . . .

Again my first impression—as it had been to that view of the planet from the air—was of similarity to Earth. But as we dropped down the slope, the valley came into better focus and the similarity dissolved. The trees which at first glance might have been tropical Earth growths, weren't really like any terra plant at all. Not in trunk, nor foliage, nor even shape. And the grass was a soft golden color and the river a deep, deep blue, almost like the Mediterranean . . .

We didn't speak, our eyes were too busy. Decelerating until we couldn't have been going more than forty terra miles an hour, we slid into a grove of the odd trees, on a track of hard, smooth earth which wasn't red like the desert but almost the same blue-grey as the rock. The trees were thick on each side of us—and when I saw Adams and Farman with their hands on the butts of their D-R pistols, I followed the example, not quite so eager for sightseeing now . . .

The trees began to thin, and the track curved. We cleared the grove and seemed to be heading for a towering shoulder or rock which jutted out from the mountainside. Adams and Farman relaxed, and their hands came away from the pistols butts. The Robot was driving really slow now, and there was plenty of time to take stock of our latest surroundings.

They were beautiful, but as different from the country we'd just passed through as that had been from the desert. I spotted what made the difference, and was just going to speak when Adams did it for me.

"Landscaped," he said.

He was right. There was something about the whole terrain, which stretched for maybe a quarter of a terra-mile each side of the rock-mass, that shouted of planning. The way the smooth reaches of golden turf melted into copses of trees and shrubs; the way the deep-blue stream curved in a graceful sweep; the way the whole vista melted gradually into the mountains ahead and the wild country at each side . . .

I said, "You hit it right, Skipper. This was all laid out."

“There ought to be a building,” Adams said. “Or buildings.”

Farman said, “But there isn’t. Nary construction.”

But I’d seen something. “Yes, there is,” I said, pointing. “Look at that pool.”

It was on our left, with the track running between it and the shoulder of rock. It was surrounded by trees and a hedge which had reddish-white flowers and bluish leaves. It was fed by the blue stream, and might have been a natural little lake—except for what I’d seen on the far side.

Farman said, “You’re nuts, Doc—it’s just a pond.”

I pointed again. “What about that paving? Like crazy-pavement at home! Don’t tell me that’s natural!”

But they weren’t looking at the pool any more. They were staring out the other way. I turned my head and saw we had passed the blunt end of the shoulder and were almost in the shadow of its side. And then I saw a sight which astonished me more than anything else had yet.

Adams said, “I knew there had to be a house!”

Farman said, “Beam that! Right out of the solid rock!”

I didn’t say anything; I was too busy trying to believe what I saw. Which was a paved court or patio, with strangely colored flowers massed around a fountain of the blue water—and, behind, the timbered and windowed front of a long, low house which had no house backing it. Which had nothing behind it except the rock into which the front was inset. Some Herculean labor had scooped a dwelling from the solid rock itself and then sealed the mouth of the excavation with a house-front which told beyond any doubt it had been designed by Man . . .

We rolled to a stop at the edge of the patio, only a few yards from a massive door of some wood which looked like oak but was amethyst-grey.

“End of the line,” said Farman, and unhooked his safety belt.

The Robot spoke—and I started violently. Somehow I’d managed to forget what it was. It said, “Descend please.”

We descended. I was last, and as my feet hit the ground the big door opened and a man stepped out and stood looking at us. Farman’s hand started an instinctive move toward his hip, but Adams nudged him viciously and the hand dropped to his side.

The man in the doorway came toward us. “So you have arrived, gentlemen,” he said. “Allow me to introduce myself—I am Morbius.” His voice was deep, but curiously flat and unresonant.

We stared at him. He was a big man, and striking, with a head of greying dark hair and a neat forked beard which lent the impassive face an effect partly Oriental, partly satanic.

Adams said, “John Adams, Commander.” He included me and Farman in a single gesture. “Lieutenant Farman, my Astrogator. Major Ostrow, our Medical Officer.”

Morbius took a pace forward, and shook hands with us in turn. His grip felt like a much younger man’s. There was a clanking sound from behind us, and the Robot climbed off the vehicle and passed us with its lumbering stride and stopped by the open door and stood to one side of it. I could see a single light glowing behind the headpiece louvres.

Morbius smiled. “His manners are always better than mine,” he said, “Please come in, gentlemen.” He shepherded us through the doorway—and behind us the Robot closed the big door.

We were in a small entrance-hall, cool and dimly lighted. We left our caps on what looked like a big chest and followed Morbius through an archway and into a large room with windows all along its length. The glass was preternaturally clear, so that when I looked out at the patio, and the trees and grass and pool, they seemed to stand out more sharply than they had when we were outside.

We stood bunched together, a stiff-looking trio, and stared at our host. Who seemed as much at ease as we were the reverse.

“Please sit down, gentlemen,” he said. “Make yourselves at home.” There was a twitch at the corner of his mouth, and I was sure he was amused by us.

Farman and Adams close a settee, and I took a chair across from them. Morbius stayed on his feet, and for the first time I noticed his clothes—a tunic and trousers of some dark, soft material which had a curious inner sheen to it.

He said, “I hope you realize, gentlemen, that you are my first visitors. This is therefore an Occasion—and must be treated as such.” He smiled. “So if you will forgive me for a moment—”

He crossed the room, and vanished through an inner door. Adams and Farman went into a low-voiced huddle, and I looked around me with avid curiosity at what was obviously the main living-room of this extraordinary house.

The most extraordinary thing about it was that it didn’t look extraordinary at all. The room itself, and everything in it, was so well-designed, so well balanced, that it wasn’t until I’d begun to analyze it that I realized how unusual everything was. So unusual—in fabric, shape and design—that I couldn’t understand why the over-all

impression wasn't bizarre to the point of being fantastic.

However, it wasn't. Everything—the total picture—was pleasant, and comfortable, with an air of controlled luxury. It puzzled me, but I couldn't make it come out any other way and was just noticing that the material covering most of the furniture had the same curious inner sheen as Morbius' tunic, when the man himself came back into the room.

He was followed by the Robot, which carried on one of its stubby metal arms a tray with wine glasses and a decanter. It set down the tray on a low table near Adams and Farman, and then, without any word or sign from Morbius, crossed back to the door and went out.

Morbius picked up the decanter—it was like a solid triangle of brilliant crystal, and filled with a pale, straw-colored liquid—and looked around at us.

"This, gentlemen," he said, "is a wine I make from a curious fruit we have here, grapelike, but arboreal rather than vineal." He took the stopper from the decanter, began to fill the glasses. "My first experiments weren't too successful—but in the last few years I have been much more fortunate."

He handed us each a glass, but didn't pick up his own. He said, "Even the bouquet, you will find, is excellent."

I was lifting my glass when I caught a glance from Adams; neither he nor Farman had raised theirs. Adams looked at Morbius and said, "Aren't you joining us, Doctor?" without any inflection at all.

"But of course—" Morbius picked up the last glass, and again I couldn't be sure whether a smile was tugging at one corner of his mouth. He said, "Your health, gentlemen," and put the glass to his lips and drank.

Adams and Farman gulped at theirs, but after the first sip I took mine slowly and with great respect. The wine was exquisite, its first impact like a sort of etherealized Neirsteiner of the best vintage, but with a depth and subtlety no Earthgrown grape could ever hope to match.

"Your verdict, gentlemen?" said Morbius—and Adams gave him a "Very good," and Jerry Farman said, "Fine, fine." I said they had no more palate than a pair of Martians, and told Morbius what *I* thought, at some length.

I could feel disapproval from Adams, but I went on all the same. The man Morbius was fascinating me from a professional point of view, and I wanted to see his reaction to fulsome praise even over such a small matter as the wine. It was what I'd expected, but so much more so that I was amazed. He took the praise as his due, but it was

easy to see that the more he got the better he liked it. He began to describe to me the whole process of his wine making—and I could see that, though Adams was his usual impassive self, Jerry Farman was growing more and more impatient. Morbius must have noticed it too, because he suddenly broke off, made a neat but rather sardonic apology—and again asked us to excuse him for a moment; this time while he went to "see about lunch."

The door had hardly slid shut behind him, when Farman turned on Adams. He kept his voice low, but his blond brows were pulled together in a scowl. He said, "What the hell's going on? Is this a kaffe-klatch—or are we on a mission!"

Adams looked at him. "That's enough, Jerry," he said. "Take it easy."

But Farman was too angry to stop. He said, "I don't get it! We're on orders to find out what happened to the *Bellerophon* party—but before we even set down this Morbius radios us to stay the hell away, we're not wanted! He says he's fine—but it may be too Goddamn bad for us kids if we land. So we land anyway. So he doesn't meet us himself, he sends a sonovabitch mechanical man for us on a sonovabitch mechanical buckboard! So what do we do—put him through the hoop and find out what's cooking? Oh no! We sit around, drinking his Goddamn puffleberry wine and saying Yessir-nosir while he gets buttered up by Doc—"

"That'll do, Lieutenant!" Now Adams was getting mad too. He stared at Farman with a steady cold eye. "I'm in command of this mission," he said. "You want to complain about the way I handle it, put in a G-3 form when we get back. Till then, you'll do what I say. You'll raise no questions with Morbius. I'll do that. When I'm good and ready." He switched the chill gaze on me. "That goes for you too, Doc."

I nodded, and Jerry Farman said stiffly, "Very good, Commander."

Adams relaxed a little. "Maybe I want him to do the leading—," he began. But that was all, because the door opened, and Morbius came in again. He crossed to us with his long easy stride, and looked down at us, and treated us to the smile. He said, "Robby informs me, gentlemen, that lunch is ready . . ."

III

We ate at a massive table in a corner half-walled off from the rest of the big room by a screening of translucent plastic brick. The food, like

the wine, was delicious, and equally different from anything I'd ever tasted. But I didn't really give it the attention it deserved; I was too busy being conscious of the strangeness of everything else. Of being on Altair-4 at all; of being in this incredible house cut out of rock; of wondering about this extraordinary man Morbius while I pretended to listen to the small talk he was exchanging with Adams; of trying to guess where the crystal glasses and the porcelain-like chinaware came from; of being served this excellent food by a seven-foot machine which had presumably prepared it as well . . .

It was a discussion of the machine, the Robot (I was almost at the stage myself of thinking of it as "he" and "Robby") which brought me out of this haze of wonder. Because I suddenly heard Adams say, "You mean what we've been eating was all synthetic, made by the Ro—by Robby?"

Morbius' mouth twitched again, and this time I knew he was repressing a contemptuous smile. He said, "Yes indeed. He has—how shall I put it?—a built-in ability to produce substances by synthesis." He broke off, looking across to where the Robot stood like a motionless butler.

"Robby—come here," he said—and the thing obeyed instantly, with three of its ponderous strides. It stood beside Morbius' chair—and the man swiveled in his seat and tapped the metal framework where the abdomen would have been in a human structure. He said, "Down here is the equivalent of a miniature, but excellently functioning, chemical laboratory. By feeding a sample of almost any substance, or compound substance, into this slot—" now his finger pointed to an aperture at about the position of the thorax—"one sets the laboratory to work on an analysis. This is completed almost simultaneously with the introduction of the sample—and Robby can then produce an identical molecular structure . . ."

He paused there, letting this remarkable statement sink in. He said, after the pause, "In any quantity, I should add. If the volume required is relatively small, he can complete the reproduction within his own framework. If it's too large, he uses a workshop I've fitted up for him."

He swung back to face the table again, saying, "All right, Robby,"—and the thing turned and marched back to its butler's position.

Farman said, "The Scientist's Dream, huh?" He was smiling; an incredulous, unpleasant smile. "And the Housewife's Delight."

"Also," said Morbius, "the perfect Jack-of-all-trades," He seemed amused by Farman's disbelief. "Add selfless and absolute obedience, coupled with quite phenomenal power, and you—" he smiled—"Well, you have Robby."

Adams said, “Phenomenal power?”

“Indeed yes!” Morbius was emphatic. “A useful factor, don’t you think, in an instrument of this kind?”

“Maybe,” Adams said. “Could be dangerous, though.”

“Dangerous?” Morbius studied him with raised brows.

Adams said, “Suppose control was in the wrong hands.” He was growing more and more expressionless.

Morbius laughed. “I trust you haven’t cast me for the tired role of The Mad Scientist, Commander.” He laughed again, and I didn’t like the sound.

“But even if I were,” he said, “I assure you Robby could never be a menace to other human beings.” He cocked a sardonic eye at Adams. “Which, I take it, is what you mean by ‘dangerous.’ ”

“Why couldn’t he?” Adams said. “He obeys orders,”

Morbius sighed. “Let me demonstrate, Commander,” he said wearily. “Robby—open the window.”

The great metal figure lumbered past the table to the one window in this section of the room. It pressed a switch in the framework and the glass slid down into the sill.

Morbius said, “Come here, Robby,” and then, when the Robot stood beside his chair, turned to Adams again. “Would you lend me that formidable looking sidearm, Commander?”

Adams slid the D-R pistol from its holster and passed it across the table, butt foremost. I saw Farman, not bothering to conceal the movement, drop his hand on the butt of his own pistol.

Morbius handed Adams’ gun to the Robot—and a clawlike grip I hadn’t noticed before slid out of the metal arm and closed around the weapon.

“Aim this,” Morbius said, “at the bough to the right.” He pointed to the window, where a bush-like tree jutted a slender branch across a third of the open space.

The Robot raised the pistol. Somehow, with the action, it seemed more than ever the travesty of a man.

Morbius said, “Press the trigger.”

There was the vicious spit-and-crackle and shimmering blue flame-tongue a D-R always makes. And the bough ceased to exist. It was as neat a shot, with as short a jet, as any Marksman first-class could have made.

Morbius said, “You now understand the mechanism?”

The Robot said, “Yes,”

"Aim it at Commander Adams."

"What the hell—" Farman jumped to his feet, pistol half out of his holster. But Adams waved him down, his eyes fixed on the Robot.

The metal arm raised the gun; the muzzle pointed, rock-steady, at Adams' chest.

My hand went instinctively to my own pistol. The butt felt reassuring.

Morbius said, "Robby—press the trigger!" His eyes were on Adams, who hadn't moved a muscle.

An extraordinary sound, a sort of vibrant whine, came from the Robot. Behind the louvres of the head, lights flashed madly, now in no particular pattern. It may have been my imagination, but it seemed to me that the whole huge frame was shaking. The pistol remained pointed, but the metal talon didn't—could not—close on the trigger.

Morbius said, "Order cancelled," and the weird agitation in the Robot stopped as quickly as it had started. The right arm was lowered, and Morbius took the pistol from the metal hooks and laid it on the table and pushed it across to Adams.

"You see?" he said. "He couldn't carry out that order. In simple terms, a basic inhibition against doing harm to—ah—any rational being was built into him."

Adams picked up the gun and slid it back into his holster. Farman did the same with his. The tension ought to have been eased—but somehow it wasn't. Adams was mad; though his expression didn't change, I knew him well enough to feel it.

He said, "Very interesting, Doctor." His voice was chill, clipped. "And now it's time I got on with my job." He'd obviously given Morbius as much rope as he was going to. "First," he said, "I must interview the other members of your Expedition. And then—"

He stopped abruptly, staring at Morbius. The man hadn't spoken, but his expression was enough. He was obviously suffering, and for the first time I felt humanity in him. His face was white and lined and he seemed, suddenly, ten years older.

"At last we come to it," he said slowly. "I suppose you have thought my behavior strange, Commander—perhaps incomprehensible. But the tragic answer to your question is also the reason for the warning I gave you not to set down your ship upon this planet . . ."

He paused, and I could see he was searching for words. But Adams pressed on. "One thing at a time," he said. "What do you mean —'tragic answer'? Where are the others?"

Morbius met his eyes steadily. "They are dead, Commander."

There was silence—until Adams broke it.

"How?" he said. "When?"

"Before the end of our first year on this planet." Morbius' voice was heavy, tired. "They were—destroyed," he said. "By—by some inexplicable Force . . ." He was searching for words again, and finding them all inadequate. His forehead was glistening with sweat. "A Force beyond all human experience. Invisible—impalpable—" He made a helpless gesture. "It was—uncontrolled—elemental . . ." His voice died away.

"Uncontrolled," repeated Adams slowly. "Implying there's no native form of intelligent life on this planet."

"Exactly. If there were, the natural assumption would be that this was controlling the—the Force." Morbius was leaning forward now, his eyes fixed on Adams.

"But," he said, with slow, deliberate emphasis, "there is no life here of the kind you mean. There is no native life here at all, except for the plants and a few forms of lower animal existence . . . You have my word for that. We explored this strange land very thoroughly—and completely satisfied ourselves." His face clouded. "That was in the first months, of course. Before—before the holocaust . . ."

"You said these people were destroyed. What did you mean? How did they die?" There was a factual coldness to Adams' voice that verged on brutality.

Morbius closed his eyes. "They were—they were torn! . . . Rent apart! . . ." His voice faltered. "Like—like rag dolls ripped to bloody shreds by a malignant child!"

He put a hand to his head for a moment, then sat straight and looked at us again. The sweat was trickling down his temples. He said, "Come with me—" and stood up and led us to the open window.

"Look there." He pointed. "Across the patio to the pool. Then beyond, to that clearing in the trees."

We saw a little glade, and in it a row of grassy mounds. Then—blue-grey headstones marked them unmistakably.

Morbius said, very low, "We did what we could, my wife and I . . ." He turned away abruptly and strode back to the table and dropped into his chair.

We followed him. After a moment Adam said, "Your wife, Doctor?" very quietly—and then, when Morbius nodded, "There was no entry for her on the *Bellerophon*'s rolls."

"Under Bio-Chemists, you will find the name Julia Marsin." Morbius' voice was hardly more than a whisper. "She and I were

married on the voyage. By the ship's Commander . . ."

Adams went right on, forcing the pace. "The others were killed, but you and your wife were unharmed? How do you explain that?"

"I don't. I—I can't." The man's voice was stronger now. "The only theory I've evolved is that we both had a love for this new world. So that none of our thoughts, even, were inimical to it . . ."

"What does your wife think? Does she agree?" I was watching Adams as he spoke, but I didn't know whether he had made the mistake on purpose.

Morbius flinched. "My wife thought exactly as I do . . . She died a year later, God help me! . . . Her death was from—from natural causes . . ."

Still Adams didn't let up. He said, "I have to go on, I'm afraid . . . What about the *Bellerophon*—the ship herself?"

"It was—blown to pieces . . . I almost said vaporized." A little color had come back to Morbius' face. "You see, when all but five of us had been victims of the—the Force, the three others determined to try to take the ship off themselves. They were completely untrained as pilots or engineers—but they wouldn't listen when I told them they hadn't a chance. They preferred to take the known risk . . ."

He stopped, pulling out a handkerchief and mopping at his face. "They succeeded in launching the ship," he said. "But they weren't more than a thousand feet up when there was a tremendous explosion, and a blinding flash . . . And the *Bellerophon* was gone—disintegrated . . ." He sighed, shook his head. "I've never been able to decide whether the disaster was brought about by their ignorance—or by another emanation of the Force . . ."

Adams said, "And since you've been alone, you've never had any trouble with this 'Force'? Never even been threatened?" I wondered how much, if any, he believed, of Morbius' story.

Morbius frowned. "I've told you I seem immune, Commander," he said curtly. "But I've taken such precautions as I can. In case my—ah—status should change." He tried a smile, not very successfully.

"Precautions?"

"Purely physical safeguards, Commander . . . This is one of them—" He reached out to the wall and pressed a switch . . .

And in one silent split second day seemed to turn into night. If lights hadn't flashed on in a ceiling-trough, we would have been in pitch darkness.

Farman grabbed for his pistol again. Adams growled, "What the hell—"

Then I saw that metal shutters from sheathing in the walls had flashed across the window beside us; presumably, too, over all the other windows in the room. The metal was odd-looking—a sort of dull, brownish grey.

And I saw that Morbius was smiling that smile again. The demonstration, and its effect on us, had brought back his earlier manner. He said, “I am sorry if I alarmed you, gentlemen. But at least you see what I mean about physical precautions. The whole front of this house is now armored.” He pressed the wall-switch again, and the shutters flashed back, and daylight streamed in once more.

Adams looked at the window. He said, “That metal—what is it?”

Morbius hesitated. Perhaps he saw where the question was leading. He said slowly, “It’s an alloy, Commander. A compound of native ores. Amazingly dense, tremendously strong, and extremely light.”

“Native ores?” Adams said sharply. “Who found them? More important—who worked them?”

“I discovered them.” There was a edge to Morbius’ voice now. “Robby and I ‘worked’ them, as you call it.”

Adams said, “Who built this house? Or excavated it?”

“The work was done in the main by Robby, Commander. And may I tell you—”

“In a moment. First—who made the Robot?”

There it was—the question which had been nagging at my mind ever since the extraordinary vehicle had arrived out of the desert. Adams had taken the long way around to reach it, but I could see his reasons.

Morbius sat without speaking for a long moment. Neither he nor Adams moved. Beside me, Farman shifted uneasily in his chair and took out a cigarette and pulled off the ignitor cap and started to smoke.

At last Morbius said coldly, “When you interrupted me, Commander, I was about to say that I didn’t like your tone. Nor your attitude.”

“I’m sorry, Doctor.” Adams was carefully precise. “I’m only trying to carry out my duties. Would you tell me, please, who designed and constructed the Robot.”

“I think the answer is obvious, Commander. I designed and constructed the Robot.” Morbius was standing now, leaning his hands on the table. It looked as if his self-control might break, and I wondered what would happen if it did.

Adams stood up too; they were almost of a height. Adams said,

“From the *Bellerophon* roster I know you’re not what they call a practical scientist. You’re a Philologist. You deal in words and communications. Spoken, written or otherwise. Correct?”

“Entirely.”

“So I wonder,” Adams said, “just where you got the knowledge to do what you’ve done. Or the tools.”

“As for the knowledge, Commander—you perhaps forget the old truism, ‘Necessity is the Mother of Invention.’ ” Morbius flushed darkly—and then the blood ebbed from his face, leaving it startling white against the black of his beard.

Adams said, “You mean that to go for the tools too?” For the first time there was a deliberate edge to his voice.

“Tools?” Morbius said. “There is only one essential ‘tool,’ Commander, and that is the mind.” The bitter, contemptuous smile appeared again.

Adams said, “That sounds very clever, Doctor. But I don’t know what it means.” The edge to his voice was sharper. “Maybe you’d better ”

He never finished, because there was an interruption.

It came from Farman, and it had nothing to do with either Adams or Morbius. It was a wordless exclamation, but more expressive of amazement than any words could have been.

He had jumped to his feet, and was looking out toward the main part of the room.

I turned my head—and found myself staring, incredulously, at Trouble . . .

IV

Trouble, as it so often is, was a woman. Or maybe I should say a girl . . .

She stood there, very much at home in this impossible house, and surveyed the four males. She was perhaps nineteen. She had hair the color of ripe corn and eyes as blue as the water in the stream outside. She was neither short nor tall, but exactly the perfect height to match the perfect lines of her body. Which, in the ancient phrase, was a sight for sore eyes, every delicious line and curve of it covered yet delightfully revealed by the dress she wore. It wasn’t like any garment I’d ever seen, but it was as right for her as the strange furnishings were for this strange house. It was in one piece, and although it was

loose fitting, the lines it had were the lines of its wearer; not a clever imitation of those lines but somehow the very lines themselves. And the soft, beautiful material had the same inner glow of all the other fabrics I'd seen here . . .

It could only have been a second or so, but it seemed much longer that we all stayed motionless, like a video-graph jammed on a single frame, until Morbius set things going again. He frowned at the girl and moved toward her.

"Altaira!" he said. "I asked you not to interrupt us—"

In spite of the frown and the harsh tone, he was a different man. There was human warmth and feeling in every line of him, every syllable he uttered.

She laid a hand on his arm. There was a ring on her little finger that sparkled with the blood-red of a ruby. She looked up at him, and the anger drained out of his face. And no wonder. It was a look which might have launched a thousand Space-ships, let alone Trojan galleys.

"But Father—" she said, "I thought you meant just at lunch—" She didn't seem to be looking at us, but I knew she was.

"My dear child," began Morbius, "you know perfectly well—"

"Of course I do," she said. "But I—I just couldn't keep away. How could I!" Her voice was oddly, and delightfully, deep.

Morbius smiled down at her. A very different smile from any we had seen on his face. "No—I suppose it was too much to expect," he said.

Now she was looking at us openly. The color was coming and ebbing in her face and her breathing was fast.

Morbius faced us, dealing smoothly with what must have been an awkward situation for him. He said, "Let me present you to my daughter, gentlemen . . . Altaira—Commander Adams, Major Ostrow, Lieutenant Farman."

We made our bows. I don't know about mine, but Jerry Farman's was admirable. In strong contrast to Adams', which was little more than a nod. He seemed to be trying to repress a frown, and his face had lost color.

I said, "How do you do?"

Farman said, "Delighted to meet you," making a palpable understatement.

Adams didn't say anything.

Morbius said, "You realize, gentlemen, that this is a great experience for my daughter. She has never known any human being

except myself."

Farman looked at the girl. He was smiling, and I remembered all the stories I'd heard about him. His lupine proclivities were a by-word, even among Space-men who are wolves by nature.

He said, "How do we strike you?"

She took the question gravely, dropping her hand from Morbius' arm as if to make sure her judgment wouldn't be influenced.

She said at last, "I think you are all beautiful."

It ought to have been ridiculous, but it wasn't. The only smile it drew was a fleeting one of embarrassment from Morbius. I don't know what Adams thought: his face told nothing. But I do know I felt a sudden tremendous sympathy with the girl. Farman, of course, made capital out of it, and very smoothly.

He said, "After that, I must do something to show our appreciation." He glanced back at the luncheon table. "Can I get you anything? A glass of that wonderful wine, maybe?"

He was smiling again now—and the girl gave him an answering smile. Her mouth was as lovely as the rest of her. She said, "I think I would like wine. I'm thirsty."

I must say Farman's technique was superb. With no tactics showing, he had suddenly separated her from the rest of us and was with her at the far end of the dining-alcove.

I saw Morbius look at them. His face tightened and there was a glitter in his eyes I didn't like.

But Adams' mind was apparently far from women or Farman. He said, "Suppose we go on with our talk, Doctor," and started for the other end of the room, making for the section near the windows where we'd sat when we first came in. But he didn't get there. Because Morbius indicated chairs in a nearer group and although he said, "By all means, Commander," easily enough, it was plain he wasn't going any farther from the alcove.

Adams shrugged and sat down. Morbius took the chair nearest him, and I hovered. From the alcove came Farman's voice—and then a peal of silver laughter from Altaira. Morbius frowned. I lit a cigarette.

Adams didn't waste any time, but on the other hand, when he spoke it was plain from his tone he wasn't planning on keeping up the tension. He said, "There's one question I meant to ask before this: Why did you warn us off? Why didn't you want us to land?"

"If I didn't actually tell you, Commander," Morbius said, "I certainly implied the answer." His tone was mild, like Adams', but my ear caught a note which might have been wariness.

Adams said, "You were afraid we might be in danger? From this 'Force' you talk about?"

And then, before Morbius could reply, the girl came out of the alcove, Farman at her elbow. She was radiant; any trace of shyness there might have been about her had gone. She smiled at me, then lost the smile momentarily as she glanced at Adams. He and I started to get up, but she waved us back into our chairs with all the aplomb of a grande dame and, still with Farman beside her, was walking right on past us when Morbius said quickly, "Where are you going, Alta?"

She stopped and turned. Farman stopped and turned. She said, "Outside for a few minutes. Lieutenant Farman thinks I must be lonely here, so I told him I had my friends. He wants to meet them."

She moved on. Farman moved on. Morbius started to get up, then sank back into his chair, frowning. We heard the big door open and close, and he shot an involuntary glance toward the sound. It was the sort of glance I could imagine Farman feeling even if he couldn't see it. I looked at Adams and then at the entrance—and he gave the ghost of a nod.

I said, "Friends?" and looked at Morbius with what I hoped was the right expression. I *was* curious anyway. I said, "What did your daughter mean, Doctor?" and made a movement as if I wanted to get up and go see.

We'd played it right. The frown went and Morbius said, "Why don't you join them, Doctor?" He actually smiled. "You might be amused, I think. And interested."

"Thanks," I said. "I'm sure I will be." I crossed quickly to the entrance and swung the big door open and stepped out onto the patio.

Farman and the girl weren't on it. They were on the other side, walking across the oddly-tinted grass toward the blue pool. Again I heard the girl's laughter.

They didn't hear me until I was almost up with them. Then Farman turned his head quickly—and I got a look which more than matched the one Morbius had sent after him. But then Altaira turned too—and he changed it to a grin.

He said, "Hi there, Doc!" and I said, "Hi!" and looked at the girl and asked, "Could I meet these friends of yours too?"

"Of course you can," she said. "Do you wonder about my friends as much as the Lieutenant does?"

Farman said, "I'll bet he does. Don't you, Doc?" Somehow, he was now between us; they were a pair, I was odd man.

Altaira took something from a pocket in the tunic-dress. It glittered

in the turquoise light and looked like a little golden tube. She said, “Now you must both stay here. And you mustn’t move, or say anything . . .”

She walked away from us, making for the trees to the right of the pool. Looking after her, Farman spoke to me without turning his head. He said, “Hell, Doc! What’s the idea trying to spoil my time?”

I said, “The hell with your time. There’s a situation back there.” I jerked my head at the house. “You wouldn’t want Morbius after you, would you? With something a lot worse than a farmer’s hand-blaster!”

He was still looking at the girl. She’d stopped now, halfway between us and the trees. There was a big bushy plant beside her, and she was bending over it, reaching her arm down into its foliage.

Farman was watching her too. He said, “Pop can go sit on a rocket! It’d take more than him, or that Force of his, to keep me away from that!”

I said, “You’d better go easy, my friend. The Skipper won’t like it either.”

“John Adams!” he said. “Hah!” and I realized I might as well save my breath.

Now Altaira had straightened, holding something in her hand. With the other she put the tube to her lips. There was no sound, but I felt a sharp stabbing in my eardrums. So it was a supersonic whistle, like the dog-whistles at home, only of far higher range.

Adams had the same thought. “For Crissake!” he said. “What’re we going to see? Altairian chihuahuas?”

But what we saw was more astonishing than any dog would have been. I spotted them first, dark shapes dropping to the ground in the shadow of the trees, then racing out with weird bounding strides into the light.

“Monkeys, by God!” said Farman. “What the hell next!”

There were eight of them. They came skittering across the grass in hops and canters and dog-trots, but when they reached the waiting figure of the girl they spread out before her in a semi-circle. A great chattering came from them, and we could hear Altaira’s voice as she laughed and called to them.

“Monkeys!” muttered Farman again. “Goddamn waste of time!”

I grinned at him. “That’s quite a monorail mind you have there,” I said. “Doesn’t it strike you as faintly interesting to find them here?”

He did look at me now, just for an instant. He said, “Say! That is a funny one!” and then shrugged. “Ah—what’s a monkey, anyway?” His gaze switched back to Altaira.

I watched the semi-circle, fascinated, as one by one its members came to the girl's call and took what she gave them—it was some sort of food—and went back to their places and sat nibbling. With every minute, I was more astonished. Because each was of a different kind. There wasn't even one pair. I began to name them to myself. There was a gibbon, a capuchin, a chimpanzee; a howler, an ouakari, a macaque; a titi and a durukuli . . .

In any place on Earth except a Zoo, the collection wouldn't have made sense. And even in a Zoo they'd have had to keep them separate. But here, where even one kind seemed an impossibility, this peaceful collection was enough to make a zoologist's mind start reeling . . .

The last to come to Altaira was the little marmoset. She held a tid-bit high for him, and he jumped to her shoulder in one spring and reached it from there. Her laughter came back to us—and then, obeying some command, he ran back to his place in the semi-circle.

Altaira put the whistle to her lips again. This time there were two stabs in my ears—and out from the trees there came trotting a pair of deer. They were both does, both White-tails—and somehow even more incredible here than the monkeys. They came straight to the girl and stood close, nuzzling at her. She put an arm around each neck and walked with them across to the bush and slid her hand into it again and brought out something which she gave them to eat. She must, I realized, have a cache hidden there. The monkeys, all watching her, still sat in their semicircle.

Now Altaira stood back from the deer and clapped her hands. The two creatures trotted off, back toward the trees again—and in a moment I saw that the monkeys too were scampering away.

Farman said, "Maybe the circus is over, Doc?" He started toward the girl; then stopped as she put the whistle to her mouth again. "Goddamit!" he said, "I want in the act."

This time there were three blasts against my eardrums. I wondered what was coming next, and saw that the girl was staring off to the right, shading her eyes as she looked.

"Jesus!" said Farman suddenly. I wheeled around and saw his hand go to his holster and yank out his D-R. I also saw, away to the left, what he had seen. From behind the flowering hedge which screened the pool, another animal was coming. A very different animal.

A tawny, jet-striped Bengal tiger. A magnificent beast, young and male and weighing at least seven hundred pounds. It was moving at a slow rippling trot—until, scenting us, it suddenly stopped in its tracks, dropped its great head and let out a blood-chilling roar.

And everything seemed to happen at once. Farman aimed the pistol

—from the house behind us came a harsh shout in Morbius' voice, "Don't shoot!"—Altaira wheeled around and ran toward the great cat, calling to us, "It's all right—it's all right!"

Farman rammed the D-R back into his holster. "For Christ's sake!" he said. "Look at that!"

The tiger had come out of its menacing crouch as Altaira walked up to it. Now it was siting down and batting at her playfully with a huge forepaw. She began to fondle it, pulling at its ears, and it rested its great head against her.

I glanced back at the house and saw Morbius and Adams framed in an open window. Morbius called, "Altaira—you had better come in now," and the girl waved assent, with a word and a gesture sending the tiger off tame as any house-cat . . .

We went to meet her as she came toward us. The breeze ruffled her hair and pressed the clinging fabric of her dress still closer against her. Beside me, I heard Farman catch his breath.

She said, "You see? Khan is really my best friend. I should have told you about him first." Her eyes widened, horrified. "Would you really have killed him—"

Farman's interruption was beautifully timed. "Not unless I'd seen *you* were in danger," he said. His profile was ruggedly masculine, his jaw protruding just enough.

She gave him a glance—and I was really worried for the first time. He was doing too well.

I put in an oar. I said to the girl, "I was fascinated by all your animals," and—maybe a trifle reluctantly—she turned to look at me.

I said, "What I can't understand is finding even one type of Earth animal here. Let alone three . . ."

We were walking toward the house, and Farman went around to her other side, leaving her between us. I didn't think she was going to answer me, so I went right on. "Are there any others?" I said—and she gave me an odd, puzzled little frown.

"I—I don't know," she said. "Here—" she made a little gesture —"there are only the ones you've seen . . . When I was a very little girl I—I don't think they were here. But then—well, they just came . . ."

We were on the patio now—and she suddenly ran ahead of us and opened the big door. Farman was only a step behind her, and I tailed them into the living room. I could hear Adams' voice before I could see him. There was something odd about its inflections, and in front of me Altaira stopped suddenly, surprised.

I went further into the room—and saw Morbius and Adams still by the open window. Adams was sitting on the arm of a chair and in his hand was the A-V projector from his belt.

He was in contact with the ship. He stopped talking just as I saw him, and moved the glittering little cylinder around and about so that its eye could pick up our surroundings. I had a mental picture of Lonnie Quinn in front of the big screen, with as many of the crew as weren't on duty crowding behind him to watch.

Adams moved the tiny projector near his mouth. "There you are," he said. "You can see we're all right?"

Quinn's voice came over, fault and metallic but completely audible. It said, "So it seems, Skipper," on a surprised note. It occurred to me that Adams—whether purposely or not—hadn't swung the viewer to include Altaira.

Adams said, "The situation here makes it desirable I should get audio communication with Base . . ." The pompous wording made me realize how careful he was being.

There was a pause. I could imagine the look on Quinn's face. "But, Skipper," came his tinny voice, "we're not equipped—"

"I know—I know." Adams cut him short. "What I want to find out—could you rig something?"

Another pause, not quite so long this time. Then the answer, "I could try." The time-honored reply of all Devisors I've ever known to the time-honored challenge, "Couldn't you rig it?"

Adams waited; he knew his man. And after a moment Lonnie's voice went on, "It'd mean taking out one of the cores, and immobilizing the ship while it was out. You realize that?"

"So?" said Adams—and then was besieged by a flood of technicalities. Out of my depth, I glanced at Morbius, and saw he was listening with a faint smile of complete, even condescending, comprehension. I looked around for Farman, and found that he and Altaira were at the other side of the room, deep in talk. Or Farman was deep in talk and the girl over ears in listening.

"Right," said Adams. "Good man, Lon. We'll be back pretty soon." He switched off and thrust the cylinder back into his belt. He looked at Morbius and said, "You heard all that, Doctor. He'll rig a transmitter. Or try to."

"Yes," said Morbius. "Yes . . . Did he give any estimate of how long the work would take?"

Adams shook his head. "He never will. My guess would be a week—or more." His manner, like Morbius', showed that they weren't at each

other's throats any more. I wondered why.

Morbius looked at me. "Major Ostrow seems a trifle bewildered," he said. "As well he might . . . We are at a strange impasse here, Major. The Commander feels it his duty to—ah—rescue me. However, I have no desire to be 'rescued.' I would in fact consider any attempt to remove me and mine from this planet as being forcible abduction."

His tone was deliberately light, but there was no doubt of his absolute sincerity. He went on looking at me. He said, "I'm sure *you* will understand me, Doctor. You have seen my house—its surroundings—the way of life I have made here. Can you imagine any man in his senses willingly leaving all this for the stress and hurly-burly of that tired little planet Earth?"

Adams said, "I work under orders. We'll have to wait and see."

Morbius said, "Exactly," but went on looking at me.

I didn't want to say it, but it came out. I said, "If it was just a question of yourself, Doctor Morbius—" and left it at that.

His smile went. He glanced at the other side of the room, and frowned. He raised his voice and said, "Altaira!" sharply.

The girl looked around, then crossed to him, Farman not far behind. I don't know what Morbius was going to say to her—but Adams fortunately stopped it. He stood up and said, "We'll be going now, Doctor," and looked at me and Farman. He didn't look at the girl. He behaved, in fact, as if she weren't there—and she was staring at him with a little frown.

"Well, if you must, Commander—" Morbius showed nothing except civility. "I will send for Robby."

He did nothing, said nothing else. But within seconds a door at the far side opened and the Robot marched in. I realized then that the more one saw the thing, the greater its resemblance to a man seemed to become. And as it strode up to its master and halted in front of him, the elusive memory which had been haunting me about the word Robot suddenly wasn't elusive any more.

"Rossum's Universal Robots!" I said, without knowing I was speaking until I realized everybody was looking at me. I said, "Sorry. I just remembered something." I felt like a fool but Morbius seemed genuinely interested.

"What made you say that?" he asked.

"An old book I remember reading," I said. "A play, I think it was. Written three or four centuries ago. By a man called—was it Carroll? There was a Foreword that said the author invented the word Robot —"

“Quite right, Major.” Morbius nodded. “Except for the author’s name. It was Capek—Karel Capek. And the play was titled R.U.R. And Capek did invent the word: it has no other derivation than from his mind. It passed into the language as meaning a machine to do man’s work long before any such device had been invented. Now the word is used by all humanity—but how many of them ever heard of its inventor?”

It was odd; I found myself suddenly liking the man. Wanting to talk more with him. Having more feeling of—of compatibility than I’d ever had from any of the boys who were my companions. I said, “They call those times—Capek’s times—the Second Dark Ages. But there were some great minds then.”

“Especially among the writers,” Morbius said. “Think of Herbert George Wells. Then go farther back into the mists and remember the Gallician Verne—”

He stopped abruptly, turning his head to look at his daughter. We’d drawn aside as we were talking and Altaira and my two shipmates were near the open window. The girl was looking at Adams, not at Farman beside her, and again I noticed the difference in her expression. She was saying, “. . . So you weren’t afraid when you saw Khan? Is that what you mean, Commander?” There was a note of defiance, of challenge in her voice.

Adams said, “I figured it was just another of your friends.” He was looking at her, but from his expression—or lack of it—he might as well have been looking at a chair.

Morbius said, “All the same, Commander, you had your hand on the butt of your pistol when I shouted to the Lieutenant.” He laughed—a laugh which wasn’t quite right. He stopped laughing. “But I should tell you that, except where Altaira is concerned, that beast is a savage and dangerous animal.” His tone was level, factual.

Farman said, “But how do you know it won’t be dangerous to Alt—to your daughter sometime? Any time?” He gave Altaira a troubled glance which she didn’t miss.

She said, “Khan is my friend. He would never hurt me.”

Morbius said, “Come now, Lieutenant! You saw how tame the beast was with her. She has perfect control of it—”

Farman said, “I know, sir.” He was buttering Father now. “But it’s just—well, I can’t help wondering if anything might go wrong. Treacherous brutes, cats.”

Here was my chance to ask Morbius about the animals and their history. But before I could open my mouth, Farman was off again, talking to Altaira now.

“It’s wonderful how you handle the brute.” He was all wide-eyed admiration. “How did you start? What’s the secret?”

“The old Unicorn routine, maybe.” I heard myself say it—and wished I’d kept my mouth shut.

Because Morbius shot me a look. He didn’t seem angry, but he understood what I meant. Which is more than any of the others did. I thought he was going to speak, and was wholeheartedly grateful when Adams cut in,” Sorry, Doctor, but we must be on our way . . . Come on, Doc—Jerry.”

Then Morbius said something to the Robot, and it went to the entrance and opened the door. We made our goodbyes and started out, only to find that Morbius was with us still, speeding the parting guests. By his manner, we might have been afternoon callers in any Earth city suburb.

We took our seats in the vehicle, and the Robot climbed up in front and became part of the thing. Farman grinned and said to Morbius, “Tell him easy on the acceleration, sir,” and Morbius laughed and gave the Robot orders, sounding as if the thing were some old family retainer.

It was all very easy and matter-of-fact—and all the more preposterous for that. Adams said, “We’ll be seeing you again soon, Doctor,” and Morbius said, “The sooner the better,” and had a special word for me. “Please don’t lose any opportunity to visit us, Major Ostrow. To tell you the truth, I still miss the conversation of such kindred spirits as yourself . . .”

He didn’t give me time to answer, but stood back and said, “All right, Robby,” and we started, this time at a decorous thirty-five.

Adams sat staring straight ahead, but Farman and I turned to look back. Morbius was standing where we’d left him, at the edge of the patio, shading his eyes with a hand as he looked after us. In the open window Altaira was framed. Farman stood up and waved to her, and she raised an answering hand.

“For God’s sake!” Adams growled. “Siddown!”

And then we were around the curve in the track, heading for the grove of strange trees again. And the figures and the house had disappeared.

Our speed increased smoothly. We whirled through the grove and up the slope the other side, making for the wall of rock and its doorway to the red desert.

I looked at Farman. He was leaning back in his seat, his arms folded, his eyes half-closed.

I looked at Adams. He was sitting just as he had been at first, staring straight ahead with eyes that saw nothing. He was lost in his thoughts, and I wondered exactly what they were—

THREE

Commander J. J. Adams

I had plenty to think about. And I mean plenty! On the trip back from that damn house in the rock, I tried to straighten it out in my head.

It all came down to figuring Morbius right. And that was easier said than done. I wished it wasn't my job. I wished I could change places—and responsibilities—with Jerry Farman. Or Doc. All Jerry was thinking about right then, all he had to think about, could be covered by one very short word. And Doc was just as lucky, maybe luckier. Doc was probably worrying about who wrote some old book, or how Earth-type animals came to be on Altair-4.

But me, I had Morbius! The man who'd warned us to stay away from the planet if we knew what was healthy for us. The man who didn't tell us till he had to that he was the only survivor of his expedition. The man who'd given a pretty wild explanation about how the others died and what had happened to their ship.

An off-beam fish. With plenty about him I didn't like. Particularly the feeling he gave out that he thought he was worth two of anybody else. And that's to say nothing of his daughter. There was another headache. Pity the poor Skipper—with a piece of brig-bait like that around, and twenty sex-deprived Space-dogs with their tongues hanging out . . .

But I had to forget about her. I had to concentrate on the Hundred Credit Question: How come this Philologist had turned himself into a practical scientist? And a Tech genius way ahead of all the Techs on Earth and anywhere else we knew of? So his Robot did most of the work. So he made the Robot, the most incredible job of the lot, first of all!

Leaving the little matter of knowledge aside, how had he gotten the tools? And the materials?

And why had he said there was 'only one essential tool—the mind'? Did he think it made sense? Did he believe it made sense?

And did it?

I knew what I thought was the answer. On the trip back I was just checking with myself. But the check made no difference. I felt the

same way only more so.

I told Doc and Jerry and Lonnie Quinn after dinner. We stayed at the table and I sent the Mess orderly away and made sure there wasn't anyone in earshot. Quinn wanted to go right back to work, but I wouldn't let him. I wanted an all-Officer conference.

First, I briefed him on the set-up. I asked Doc and Jerry to check if I left anything out or gave any wrong impressions. But I must have done all right, because neither of them said anything when I'd finished.

Quinn stared at me through his big glasses. The first thing he said was, "This girl—what's she like?"

Quinn. Alonzo Quinn. He said that. It was proof, if I'd needed it, of what a year in deep Space would do, even to a woman-shirker like my Chief Devisor . . .

I said, "Oh, just a girl. Somewhere in her teens. She's never known anybody except her father. Seems a trifle arrested maybe." I didn't look at Jerry or Doc while I said it.

I went right on. "Morbius is the problem," and gave them a precis of what I thought about him. I said, "It makes no sense he could turn himself into a Tech genius overnight and produce a job like that Robot." I looked at Quinn and he shook his head.

"It's impossible," he said. "Even from what I saw of the thing. Impossible!"

That brought me right down to the point. "So," I said, "he was lying when he said there was no intelligent life on this planet. There has to be—"

Doc cut in on me. "I don't know," he said slowly. "Somehow the man didn't strike me as a liar."

I said, "He's got to be, Goddamn it!" Doc surprised me. Usually, I thought a lot of his judgment, but he was way off this time. "Can't you get it? Someone, something, has got to be supplying him tools and material."

"And knowledge," Quinn said. "And knowledge."

"That's right," said Jerry Farman. He was trying to look interested, but not making a very good job of it. There was that other subject filling his head.

I said, "Of course it's right," and looked at Doc.

"Ye-es," he said slowly. "It's logical, I suppose . . ."

"It's inevitable too." I pushed on. "So there is intelligent life here. And Morbius is in touch with it. Close touch."

I had ‘em all hooked now, even Jerry. I said, “Either he’s friends with it, or it’s bossing him. Either he doesn’t want to tell us about it, or it won’t let him.”

Jerry Farman said, “My guess is he’s friendly. I’d bet a year’s pay he was on the level when he said he didn’t want to be taken away.”

Doc said, “Skipper, why did you push him so hard at first, and then ease up all of a sudden?” He looked worried.

“Technique,” I said. “Scare ‘em, but not too much. Might bring things to a head.”

Lonnie said, “We ought to get in touch with this—this Intelligence. Obviously, we could learn a great deal.”

Doc lifted one eyebrow that way he has. “Don’t forget what happened to the rest of the *Bellerophon* people.”

Lonnie said, “How did Morbius react, Skipper, when you told him we were going to try and get through to Base?”

I looked at the other two. Jerry shrugged, and Doc said, “He didn’t show anything, one way or the other.”

I said, “So it’s an odd situation. I have to try and get orders to deal with it. But if we do get through to Base, I can guess what the orders’ll be. ‘Find out more if you can. Bring him home whether you can or not.’ ”

Jerry whistled. “If he’s not kidding about that ‘Force’ that killed all his pals, we might be in for bad trouble when we try and take him away.”

Lonnie said, “We may be in trouble anyway, I should imagine. If you can guess those orders. Skipper, so can Morbius.” He blinked at me through his big glasses. “It occurs to me that somebody—maybe I should say something—may not like us rigging up the transmitter.” He blinked again. “It also occurs to me to ask why you had to let Morbius know what you were going to do.”

That was Alonzo Quinn all over. Right to the point before anyone else. I grinned at him. “Technique again. Might flush something into the open.”

Lonnie just nodded. But Doc said, “Asking for trouble, aren’t you?”

I said, “It’s the only way I can figure to find out what activates around here. And when I know that I might want to talk to Base anyway. And this way we’ll at least be ready for anything that happens. Which reminds me—” I looked around at the three of them. “As from now, we’re on Occupation Alert—and don’t forget it . . .”

And that wound it up for the day. I had sentries out already, and all I had to do was send for the Bosun and tell him the O.A, was on.

Lonnie Quinn went back to work with his hand-picked helpers—and Jerry said as he was on the third watch he was going to his hutch and grab some rest.

Doc looked after him and shook his head. He said, "To sleep, perchance to dream," in the way that makes you know he's quoting from something a thousand years old.

I said, "You mean about that girl?" and he said, "What else?" and then he said, "You sound as if she worried you, Skipper," and I said, "You're damn right she worries me. This whole set-up's off-beam enough, without throwing in a piece of brig-bait to make it all more difficult." I wished he'd talk about something else.

But he said, "I suppose you're hoping the crew won't ever find out she's here." He was fiddling with a cigarette, not looking at me.

"They won't if I know anything about it," I said. "Lonnie won't talk. I tipped him not to. And Jerry won't open his trap. Not while there's a chance he could make his time with her."

Doc pulled the ignitor cap off the cigarette and started to smoke. He said, "Are you going to let him?"

"Christ, no!" I said. "That's not the sort of trouble I'm asking for." I was getting too loud and cut it down. "Besides, think of General Orders. Section IV, para. 22." I managed a grin.

Doc said, "Good!" and went on smoking and didn't say anything else.

We had a drink. When we'd finished it was time I went the round of the sentries. I asked Doc whether he'd like a walk and he said okay.

I'd set five posts, and each one had nothing to report. The men were all on their toes, A good bunch.

Instead of going right back to the ship, Doc and I struck out a bit into the desert. I didn't feel like bed and he didn't either. We didn't go far—just to a bunch of the sharp rocks that pushed up out of the sand. Doc said they looked like stalagmites. We found a ledge at the bottom of one and sat on it and had a cigarette. There were two green moons in the sky and the light from them made the red sand look almost black. All around. As far as a man could see. Black sand and sick-blue rocks. Green moons. And the ship on her ass there like a toadstool that didn't belong.

I took in a deep breath and Doc said, "Yes. Wonderful air, isn't it?"

I said, "The air's okay. But you can have the view."

He shifted around to look at me. "I was just thinking I could easily like this world—perhaps want to live in it, like Morbius."

I said, "Maybe I've got too much on my mind—"

“They give you boys a lot of responsibility.” He was talking slowly, the way he does sometimes. “Too much, I should say.” He went on looking at me. “They seem to ignore—well, some of the most important human factors . . .”

I wasn’t sure I knew what he was talking about. But I let it ride. You never know with Doc, but he always means something.

I dropped my cigarette on the sand and watched the glow die away. There was something I wanted to ask Doc, but I wasn’t going to. It didn’t matter any more than a matchstick in Space.

So it came out after all. I said, “What was that crack about a Unicorn?”

He didn’t say anything right away, but I could feel him look at me again. I thought he didn’t remember. I said, “When Jerry said that about the tiger. About the control she had over it—”

“I know,” Doc said. “I can quote myself. I said, ‘The old Unicorn routine’. And I wished I hadn’t.”

“What the hell did you mean?”

He said, “The Unicorn, as you may or may not know, was a beast of fable—”

“Like a horse?” I said. “A white horse—with a horn coming out of its forehead?”

He nodded. “The legend was that only one sort of human could ever catch or tame one. That was a woman—and not just any woman. She had to be young—and a virgin . . . She would go to a place—in a forest it always was—where the Unicorn might be. She would sit down, and wait. That was all she had to do. And presently, through the trees, the Unicorn would come treading delicately, full of fear but irresistibly drawn. The girl mustn’t move, just sit and wait . . . The Unicorn—ears pricked, nostrils flaring—would advance, slower and slower . . . And the girl would still sit motionless . . . And the forest would be silent, no bird singing, no woods creature stirring. There would be no sound except the rustle of the Unicorn’s hoofs in the carpet of leaves as it drew so close that its shadow came between the girl and the sun rays which filtered through the branches . . . So close that when it knelt before her, its whole lovely gleaming body a-tremble, it could lay its beautiful horned head upon her lap . . .”

Doc’s voice sort of died away. He went on looking down at the sand. Something about the goddamn fairy tale got me. Or maybe it was the way he’d told it. Or his tone or something. Anyway, I had a lump in my throat as big as a gyro-gear. It made me mad. I said, “So you were going all around the galaxy to say she was virgo, huh? She’s got to be, hasn’t she? Unless—ah, the hell with it!”

"Of course she's a virgin, John." It was the first time Doc ever called me anything but Skipper. He said, "It was just something that popped into my head. I said it without thinking. I didn't mean anything. And it wasn't a very good analogy either . . ."

"Why did you wish you hadn't said it?"

"Because I thought maybe Morbius would get the reference. He—well, he mightn't have liked it."

That made sense. I said it did, and pulled out cigarettes. We both lighted up and sat there. Smoking and not saying anything. Until Doc said, out of the blue, "The way you were looking at the girl, she must have thought you hated the sight of her." He said it as if he was just talking.

I said, "Well, she looked like trouble. Especially with Jerry Farman around."

Doc said, "Maybe she thought you were trouble too. She seemed as if she did. They way those grey eyes of hers shot sparks at you—"

I said, "They're blue—" and tried to cut the words off as they were coming out.

But it didn't work. Doc started to laugh . . .

II

Nothing happened all the next day. I mean nothing outside what we were doing ourselves. Nothing to show that anyone or anything cared what we were at. Before he started work on the transmitter, Lonnie set up a rough radar screen and left one of the Cadets to run it. And he showed Jerry how to work his radio searcher, so we could try and locate Morbius' station.

And nothing happened. Or even looked like happening. I wandered in and out of the ship, making sure everyone was on the job. I felt like hell. I hate waiting. Especially when you don't know what you're waiting for.

Radar showed nothing. Jerry couldn't get anything on his radio search. There was just the ship. And us. And the red desert and the rocks. We might have been alone on the goddamn planet.

Lonnie and his boys got the auxiliary core free at last. A nasty job, but none of 'em got burned. We all had to lend a hand to get the thing safely out to the temporary rig he'd set up.

That was in the middle of the afternoon. When the job was done and all hands were back at their posts I had to start waiting again. I

wandered over to the tractor. It was still where Lonnie and the boys had left it yesterday when they unshipped it. I checked it over. Everything was all right, but I had the notion I'd take it for a test run. Something to do.

I was climbing aboard it when I saw Doc. For the first time since breakfast. The rest of the day, he'd been in his surgery. Checking those med supplies, I suppose. I wasn't too happy to see him. I figured he might start on the topic we'd been on last night, and I was having enough trouble trying to keep my mind off it.

But when he wanted to come for a ride I couldn't tell him no. I did call him, though, for not wearing his D-R gun when we were on O.A. In no uncertain terms. I made him go back and get it.

We didn't go for the test ride anyway. Because, just when Doc came running back, Lonnie sent a hand over with a message for me to go talk to him.

I went over to the rig at the double. Lonnie was scratching his head, looking worried. He was sweating and covered with black grease. He said, "We're in trouble about housing for this thing, Skipper. I don't know how I'm going to find anything with the right density."

It was then I had my big idea. I asked what he'd order if he was at a Base depot. He said, "Two-inch lead shielding. Three hundred square feet of it." He looked at me as if I was wasting his time.

I said, "Any other work on this you could be getting on with?" His glasses slipped on his nose and he pushed them back. Now he was sure I was crazy. But he said yes there was.

I said, "Get on with it then!" and took Doc away. I said, "Better get slicked up, Doc. We're going visiting," and took him back to the ship. I could feel him looking at me, but I didn't give him a chance to say anything.

When we got to Control Area, Doc went on to his hutch, and I told Jerry to quit the radio search and slick up too. I didn't want to take him but I had to. I needed three of us at least, and I couldn't spare anyone else.

When Jerry found out where we were going, you could've seen his grin a mile away. He was making off like a jet from a mother ship when I stopped him. I said. "Hold it. Something you'd better remember. Lay off the girl."

He said, "Sure. Sure, Skipper." He might as well have given me a blast from a stand-clear siren.

III

We started at the tail end of the afternoon. Jerry drove, and made good time. The light hadn't quite gone when we got through the rocks and turned down into the valley. I told Jerry to slow up and we crawled the rest of the way at about ten terra m.p.h.

This time I really studied the country, and told Doc to keep his eyes open too. I didn't know what we were looking for, I said, but anything we'd missed would do. Particularly anything which gave any sign there was *any* other form of life than we'd seen already.

It was all pretty vague. And got us nowhere, as expected. We were going into the grove of trees near the house in the rock when Doc finally broke. I hadn't told him or Jerry my idea, but they knew something was cooking. Jerry didn't care, so long as he saw the girl again. But Doc couldn't stand it. He said suddenly, "What's behind this trip, Skipper. Better tell us, or we might make mistakes."

He was right. So I told them.

"Good thought!" Doc said. "It may not get anywhere, of course. But it's well worth a try."

Jerry didn't say anything; just nodded.

We came out of the grove and started on the curve to the rock. We hadn't seen so much as the tail of one of Altaira's animals. But when we came around to the house-front, there was Morbius. On the patio. Waiting.

Jerry pulled up and cut the engine. Which is a silent Q6 type. Except for some radar-principle gear somewhere, there didn't seem any way for him to have known we were coming. But he seemed to be expecting us, no mistake about it.

We piled out and he came to meet us. He wore the same sort of clothes as yesterday, but these were grey instead of blue. He looked a lot older, some way. He was white in the face, with black circles under his eyes.

He said he was glad to see us. He didn't have the superior smile that had made me so mad. I said I wanted help and maybe he could give it to me. He said he'd be only too glad, but we must come in the house before we got down to business.

We trooped in. There was no sign of the Robot. Or of Altaira. I said, "Here's the problem, Doctor. My Chief Devisor needs a housing for the transmitter rig. It should be two-inch lead sheeting. We don't have any —" I was trying to keep it all matter-of-fact—"and I thought possibly you could come to the rescue with three hundred square feet of it."

He did smile then. He said, "So you believe what I told you yesterday, Commander? You want me to—ah—utilize Robby's talents

on your behalf?"

I tried to look puzzled. "Why shouldn't I believe you, sir?" I pulled out a scrap of lead I'd brought from Lonnie's workshop. "I know a specimen's needed. Will this do?"

He took the piece of metal, but didn't look at it. He went on looking at me. He said, "I'm sure it will, Commander," and began to ask questions about how Lonnie was working.

I told him what I'd been told. That it was a question of crude power; of how to short-circuit the continuum on a six parsec level; of temporarily cannibalizing half the electronic gear we had; of getting the auxiliary core out of the ship to supply enough juice.

He seemed to understand it all, which was more than I did. He asked a couple of questions which I said I'd have to relay to Lonnie . . . He thought for a minute and then said, "Very well, Commander, I'll put Robby to work tonight. You should have your shielding early tomorrow."

So we were through phase one.

I wanted to get to the second right away. But I heard a quick movement, and looked around to see Jerry half way to the entrance and Doc just getting out of his chair.

Altaira was in the archway. She had on a sort of golden-yellow dress with some blue around somewhere. It wasn't very low at the neck, and I think it had long sleeves. So it oughtn't to have been any more dangerous than the one she'd worn yesterday, which was lowish and hadn't any sleeves at all.

It oughtn't to have been—but it was. Maybe it was the color. Maybe it was the way the material clung. Not that it looked as if it was meant to cling. One look at her, and you knew it wasn't.

I could sense the jolt it must be giving Jerry. And that made me mad. Mad at him. Mad at everything and everybody. Even mad at her.

So I didn't get to smile at her the way I'd meant to. She said something about being glad to see us, but the way she looked, that wasn't meant to include J. J. Adams . . .

So I went back to Morbius and phase two. I got him on one side and asked whether I could watch Robby at work.

As expected, I got no place. Very fast. For a moment he looked the way he had yesterday, mad and superior at the same time. He said, "Quite impossible," and I thought he was going to leave it at that. But then he gave me a calculating sort of look and deliberately lost some altitude. He said, "I'm afraid it wouldn't be feasible, Commander. Even I myself can't be in Robby's workshop," and sprayed a mess of

technicalities at me about temperatures and radiation and a couple of things I'd never heard of.

I said I quite understood and all that mattered was getting the lead as quickly as possible. It seemed to go down all right. If he was thinking things about me, they didn't show, anyway.

IV

That was a hell of an evening. It all worked out the right way, but getting through it was another story. We were in the house over five hours but they felt like days to me. Right away we were asked to stay for dinner. Which was a good thing for phase three of my campaign, but otherwise not so hot. I don't carry much blast as an actor, but that's what I had to be. Watching Jerry with one eye, Morbius with the other, being social all the time. Doc was a help with Jerry, but all the same I couldn't leave it all to him. Astrogator Premier Class Lieutenant Gerald Farman is one smooth operator. I wished things were different. Things Like Altaira. Maybe I wouldn't have been fighting not to get mad all the time. I didn't understand my own feelings, and that was no help. I kept trying to be civil to her, at least—but every time I'd try she'd either be doing something else or Jerry would be making at her in some new way.

I couldn't figure her. Most of the time, it didn't seem possible she'd never seen any human except her father. She was so—so poised. But then she'd suddenly say something, or react to something in a way that showed it must be true. I don't mean she seemed childish. Quite the reverse; she knew a lot more than most girls of her age would at home. She was just—I don't know. Doc could probably have put it in the right words but not me. Honest kept popping up in my head, but I guess it didn't cover what I meant. She didn't seem to know about any—well, subterfuge might hit it . . .

There was one time at dinner. She'd just said one of those things—asked some question or something—and she caught me looking at her. Her face sort of froze, and she said, "You mustn't forget, Commander Adams, that socially I'm an infant."

It wasn't only the words. It was the way she said them. And the look that went with them. All I wanted was an airlock to open and pull me through. Jerry looked as if he was trying not to smirk. Morbius looked as if he hadn't heard. But good old Doc came through. He didn't look as if anything had happened; and somehow he switched the talk. Without any effort. All very natural. He got onto the zoo again, and popped a question at Morbius. Another of those Hundred Credit kinds.

How come those terra-type animals were on Altair-4?

It was funny the way that threw Morbius. Threw him a lot harder than I had, asking if I could watch Robby. He didn't look mad and hit his altimeter the way he had with me. But he did something that seemed a lot more off-beam. He looked—well embarrassed. He looked more than that, he looked scared.

But it was only for a split second, and then he was back on base. He said, "That, Major, is one of the mysteries which I hope to solve. One of these days." He looked as if he'd like to leave it there, but Doc began pushing. Were the animals we'd seen the only kinds? Were there any more of them? Didn't their existence show that Altair-4 must have gone through a similar evolutionary process to Earth's? And wasn't it extraordinary how the protective coloration scheme had lost its bearings, with all the animals in the terra colors instead of having adapted along Altairian lines?

By this time I was plenty interested in myself, but Morbius dug in brake-prongs. He said, "As a matter of fact, Major Ostrow, you have raised the very question upon which I am now working. My researches, however, are not complete." The way he sounded, he might as well have told Doc to shut up and the hell with him.

I kicked Doc on the ankle. So he shut up and we hit the social note again. Dinner was over anyway, and before you could say quanto gravitum we were all away from the table and making with the small talk.

I would have liked to get off right then. But Morbius might have wondered why the hurry. So we had to put in some time. I had the dirty end of it, too. Because Morbius and Doc went over to a corner to play chess, and Altaira showed me and Jerry a game she and her father had invented. At least, she showed Jerry, and I was along. It was a game for two, so I said I'd kibitz, and then killed time by swinging between them and the other two.

It was grim. But it dragged itself through some way, and I got ready to take off just in time to kill Jerry's notion that he and Altaira were going out to see the animals by moonlight, for God's sake! Morbius warmed right up again; said he was glad we'd come; told me not to worry about the lead sheeting, he'd have Robby bring it out to the ship in the morning. He came out to see us off . . .

This time I drove, I went off at a good clip, and kept it up until we were out of the trees and a good terra mile up the slope to the desert. Then I slowed and found the place I'd picked out on the way. Just off the track, behind a group of odd-looking trees.

I cut the engine and slid in. When we got out and looked back, you

could hardly see the tractor. And that was from only a few feet. It was the best we could do, anyway. I kept thinking of the way he'd seemed to know we were arriving. But I had to take a chance. If he *was* doing anything like a radar-scan, it mightn't show us. And unless he'd used it as we went away, he'd never spot the tractor.

We walked, to the other edge of the track and looked down at the valley. Everything was quiet. Too quiet. With a sort of no-sound feeling you never get back home. If you did, you'd think the end of the world had come . . .

But the goddamn green moonlight showed everything I wanted. I picked a couple of spots, then briefed the guys properly. I said, "The idea's to watch. And keep watching. Don't move from your spots, but if you see anything remember it. All of it." We compared watches; it was twenty-three hundred. I said, "Okay. Rondy back here at zero three and thirty. We'd better be gone by dawn. Any questions?"

Doc didn't have any. But Jerry made up. He hadn't really been listening when I'd explained on the way. So I had to go over it, after I'd called him.

I said, "For Christ's sake get it this time. Morbius says he's going to have the Robot run off three hundred square feet of two-inch lead sheeting tonight. And let us have it in the morning. I'll bet a year's pay he'll deliver all right. But I'll lay five to one the Robot's not going to turn it out. Not from his goddamn belly or his goddamn lab which nobody can get into to watch—"

Jerry cut in. He was sore at the way I was talking. He said, "No need to make like I was a moron. You figure Morbius'll be in touch with these Altarian pals you're so sure he's got, and they'll fix it? And you figure we'll see something cooking after he's gotten in touch with 'em? Either them coming to him, or him going to them? Right?"

I said, "Sure. That's the way it has to be. Unless you believe the Robot story."

Jerry said, "Yeah. Guess you're right."

Doc said, "Suppose they have some way of getting in touch inside the rock?"

Now I got mad. We were all pretty touchy. I said, "Then they're gremlins and we don't get to see 'em. So we've lost a couple of hours sleep, for Christ sake!"

Doc said, "All right, Skipper," the way he might talk to a kid. I was going to call him about it when there was a noise from the trees behind us, near the tractor. The way we all whipped around must've been something to see. Jerry and I had guns out. Even Doc was pulling at his.

It was only one of the goddamn monkeys. Doc said afterwards it was the titi. It dropped down onto the track and squattered away, looking back at us over its shoulder.

I shoved my D-R back in the holster and turned around again and showed the guys where I wanted them, Doc first. He had about half a mile to go, straight down into the valley to a patch of stuff near the river that looked like willows. From there, I figured he could watch the whole back of the rock-shoulder. I sent him off right away. I said, “Remember—just watch. If you get in trouble, fire three bursts from your D-R. But I mean real trouble! Don’t pop off at me if I show. You guys’re on fixed points, I’m going to rove.”

He just nodded, and started off. Good old Doc. For a minute I couldn’t help wondering how many other Meds I’d give a job like this to. Then Jerry said, “What about me?” and I told him, right back down the track to the grove. Then into the trees to a place he could see the house-front from. And the same orders as Doc’s.

He grinned at me. “How’s the tiger count?” he said. “Real trouble?”

I had to grin back. There was something about him anyway. I said, “Hell, no! Give it a lump of sugar. Scratch its ears.”

He said, “Hypnotize it, huh?” and started off. I watched how he kept in any shadow there was. And you couldn’t’ve heard him with an auriscope. Good man to have with you on this sort of layout.

I waited till I couldn’t see any sign of him or Doc. Then I waited some more, till I was sure they must be on post. Then I went back to the trees by the tractor and shinnied up the smallest. I found a bough near the top and stood on it and took a good look down into the valley.

And saw just nothing except what I knew was there all the time. Nothing moved. Not even any leaves. The air was so full of oxygen you felt all the time there must be a sea-breeze or something. But there wasn’t. There wasn’t any more movement than there was sound.

The silence began to get me. I slid down off the tree. I had to do something, move somewhere. I cut down into the valley, striking for the rock-shoulder first. Until I hit the river. Then I cut around and made for Doc. Or where he ought to be.

He was there all right. He hadn’t see anything. “Or heard a sound,” he said. “Not until your voice.” And then he said, “It’s too quiet. It—it’s all dead!”

“We aren’t,” I told him. “Take it easy.” And I struck back across to the track, keeping my eyes open. I didn’t see anything.

Those two sonofabitch moons. With their green light making

everything look like copper with verdigris on it. And Doc saying, "It's all dead!"

I didn't like any of it. The longer I went on, the less I liked it. I used to think Venus was pretty damn bad, but I'd have swapped this for a first-grade Venusian jungle-bath any day. And thrown something into the trade.

I cut down the track to the grove. My watch showed five minutes of zero one. I figured I'd find Jerry and check and maybe stay out the other two hours on this side. If there was going to be anything to see, the front was the most likely place.

I wound through the trees, keeping off the track and in the shadows. The earth was soft under my boots. There were no fallen leaves, no twigs. Nothing except the earth. I didn't make a sound. Like everything else.

I heard Jerry before I saw him. His voice. It wasn't loud, and it wasn't particularly close. I couldn't hear the words—only the intonation. Which should have told me what I was going to find. But it didn't.

The voice stopped. But in the silence it sort of left a mark in the air. I changed course and went after it, deeper into the trees. I'd just caught sight of a little clearing ahead when I heard another voice. Altaira's . . .

I stopped as if I'd been shot with a nerve-lock. The first thing I felt was surprise. When that wore off I was mad.

From all angles. So mad I couldn't see straight. I didn't know I was moving, but I found myself up near the last trees by the clearing. And still in the shadow. Still not making a sound.

I could see them. There was an outcrop of rock, with plants like ferns around it. They were by the rock. Jerry was leaning against it. Altaira was in front of him. Very close. She had on a white wrap or a robe or something. It clung like the dress, And it had a low neck and her arms were bare. Jerry's hand was on her waist as if he'd had his arm around her.

I don't rank myself high as a peeping Tom, but I didn't move. Maybe I was momentarily paralyzed with rage. Maybe—oh, the hell with it!

She was saying, "No, I don't mind. I thought it was—quite pleasant." I couldn't see her face, but I could tell she was looking straight at him. Into his eyes. Her voice was deeper than ever. It sounded—I couldn't make out how it sounded. First I thought it was sort of calm. Then I thought maybe that was only a cover.

Jerry said, “Pleasant!” as if he’d been insulted. He came away from the rock and both his arms went around her.

I didn’t want to stand there. But it’s God’s truth I was frozen. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t open my mouth. He was kissing her. The way he was holding her it didn’t look as if she’d be able to breathe. And she wasn’t fighting him.

I made one hell of an effort and pushed myself away from the tree. I don’t know what I thought I was going to do. Maybe I was going to jump them. Maybe I was going to get the hell away. I don’t know.

I must have turned away though. Because when I heard Altaira’s voice again, I had to look around to see them. I don’t know what she said. Maybe there weren’t any words. But the sound was enough. She was half angry, half scared. And she was trying to pull away . . .

I could move now. I made a shuffling noise with my feet and marched out from the shadows into the clearing. As if I’d just come up. I felt—God knows how I felt.

They stared at me. And I stared at them. Jerry dropped his hold, and Altaira stood back. I said, “Lieutenant Farman—” and it sounded as mad as I was feeling. I stood where I was, and he came over. He wanted to carry it off some way but couldn’t figure how. I didn’t look at Altaira. She stayed by the rock. I looked at Jerry and dropped my voice so she couldn’t hear any words. I said, “You fix this date earlier?” and he swore he hadn’t. He was so surprised by the question I believed him. He started to tell me how he’d seen something moving in the trees and then found it was Altaira, but I cut him off. I said, “Makes no difference. You’re on a D.D. 1 anyway.” He tried to kick about the dereliction of duty, until I showed him he couldn’t even see the house-front from the clearing. Then he quit. I said, “Regard yourself as under arrest. Right now, go back to the tractor. Wait there till Doc and I get there.”

I thought for a minute he was going to take a swing at me. I almost wished he would. But he pulled himself together. He even saluted before he went off. I didn’t watch him go. I wanted to forget about him. Forget about what he’d done tonight, I mean. And I wasn’t any too happy about my own feelings. The D.D. was real bad, of course. But it wasn’t the only reason I was mad.

I looked across the clearing. Altaira was gone. I didn’t know whether I liked that or not. I figured I’d better. I started off through the trees, on a line which ought to bring me to a point where I could see the house.

I’d only gone a few yards when I saw a flutter of white in front of me. I stopped, and there was Altaira. She came and stood dead in

front of me. Her face was in shadow. She said, very low, “What did you say to him? Where’s he gone?”

I said, “Back to the tractor. To wait for me.” I remembered I hadn’t asked Jerry how he’d explained our being around two hours after we were supposed to have left. Maybe he hadn’t. Maybe the questions hadn’t come up. I wondered if she’d tell Morbius. And how he’d act if she did. It was a bad mess all around.

She seemed to be waiting for me to say something else. I didn’t, so she had to. I still couldn’t see her face very well. She said, “What did you say to him? You were angry? Was it because he wasn’t looking for that equipment you lost?”

So Jerry had put up some sort of story. I said, “Yes. He was supposed to be on duty.”

She said, “It—it wasn’t his fault he was talking to me—”

I said, “Talking to you! Ha!” I was suddenly so mad I couldn’t control it.

She got mad too. She moved back a little, and I could see her face. She looked more beautiful than ever. “Don’t talk to me like that!” she said. And then she went on, very fast, “He said a lot of things and asked if he could kiss me. And I let him. And I liked it. I liked it, I tell you! Until—until—” She couldn’t go on. She took a big breath. “And anyway,” she said, “what business of yours is it what I do?”

I said, “None. But what my officers or men do’s another story.” She didn’t say anything and I went on. I didn’t want to. It just came out. I said, “There are definite orders about women. They were written by men who know the problem. Good God—what do you think would happen to discipline if all these men were allowed to go around—” I pulled myself up just in time—“were allowed to go around passing at everything they saw that looked half-way female? It’s tough enough with things like Martians! And when it gets to be good-looking human girls, walking around in clothes like yours—”

She said, “Clothes! My clothes! What do you mean—” She was so mad now her eyes looked as if sparks were coming out of them.

I wanted to keep my mouth shut. But I couldn’t. I said, “They’re man-traps. Look at you now. Look at you this evening—and yesterday! Either stay away from my crew or dress yourself decently—”

That was as far as I got. She came close fast, and I saw her right hand come up. I grabbed for the wrist and my fingers closed over her forearm . . .

And we stood there. Just like that, with her arms raised and my fingers around it. We didn’t seem able to move. I didn’t anyway—and

she didn't even try to pull the arm away. It wasn't like anything I'd ever felt before. It was as if some sort of current had been started when I touched her. Her skin felt soft and firm under my hand; cool on top and warm underneath. I could feel it all through me.

We just stood there. I think I said something. I don't know. There was a funny little sound from her throat and she suddenly pulled her arms away. Her face crumpled like a child's and she started to cry. She whirled around and ran off into the trees.

I stood staring after her. My ringers still tingled where they'd touched her.

V

It was zero three and thirty-seven when I got back to the tractor. I felt like hell, and tired too. I'd spent the past two hours and more lying on the ground on my belly staring through the trees at the house-front. And I'd seen what I ought to have expected to see all along. Nothing, and lots of it.

Doc had been back about five minutes. He was leaning against the hood, smoking into his cupped hand. Jerry was up in the tractor, slumped in one of the jump seats at back. Doc said, "Nothing to report, Skipper. You have any luck?" I shook my head and we climbed aboard and he sat by me in front. I didn't look at Jerry and he didn't say anything and I could feel Doc wondering.

I started the engine and let her rev and then backed out from under the trees. What with everything I must have been keyed sort of high. Anyway, I reversed much faster than I would normally, and as the rear wheels hit the track I felt a soft little shudder along the steering. And something gave a high-pitched, squealing little shout. Like a kid that's been hurt.

I leaned on. the brakes and cut the engine. Doc said, "What in God's name was that?" He jumped up, and Jerry said from the back, "There's something under the wheels."

I stood up, but Doc was over the side already, kneeling by a little heap on the ground. He said, "Poor little guy," and stood up with something in his arms. He said, "One thing—he didn't suffer."

It was the titi. Doc climbed in with it and put it down and covered it with a piece of canvas. "Broken neck," he said, and sat beside me again.

So now I'd killed one of her friends. A great night!

FOUR

Commander J. J. Adams (Continued)

It was zero eight and thirty-two the next morning when the Cadet on radar duty screen buzzed me. At the same time, one of the sentries sighted something coming fast across the desert.

It was Morbius' sled.

The Robot drove almost up to the ship. By the time the dust had settled it was off the thing and talking to me. It came right up to me at the bottom of the entry gangway. It said, "Good morning. Doctor Morbius' compliments. Shielding is here for you." It turned and pointed to the sled and I saw a whole mass of stuff was loaded on the back.

I had the damndest feeling the thing was an old friend or something. I said, "Thanks a lot, Robby," without thinking this was a damn silly way to talk to a machine. I didn't really think of the thing as It, either. I thought of it as He, lights and buzzing noises and all.

He said, "Where is material required?" I pointed to Lonnie Quinn's rig and he turned and went to his chariot.

Everybody was watching him. Lonnie and his crew, the sentries, even the Bosun. And Doc came down the gangway and stood beside me.

Robby bent over the load and in a minute was coming back. On each stubby arm he had half a dozen huge squares of metal. He plodded past us to the rig and Doc and I strolled after him. Before I remembered, I expected him to ask Quinn where to put the stuff. But he just stood there. There was only one light on behind the louvres.

Lonnie remembered, trust him! Lonnie said, "Robby—put it down here." He pointed.

Robby came to life and unloaded. How the hell he did it so neatly, I don't know, but in nothing flat the metal was in a neat stack on the sand. Lonnie bent over it, feeling at the stuff with his finger. He said, "What *is* this? I wanted straight lead."

Robby said, "This material superior. Higher density—Isotope 217."

Lonnie began to look all excited. And his men were gawping at Robby, whispering at each other. I broke it up. I said, “Robby—will you tell Doctor Morbius we’re much obliged,” and he turned around and went plodding back to the sled.

I thought Lonnie might be sore. This was the second time I’d stopped him talking to Robby. But I needn’t have worried. He was bending over the metal again. He had a penknife out and was scraping at the surface and muttering to himself. I went over to him and said, “Bet you a credit it works,” and he looked up. “Of course it will!” he said. “But what is it?”

Doc and I started back for the ship and I saw he’d forgotten his D-R again. I said, “Goddamn it, Doc! How many times have I got to tell you!” I really called him this time. I was in a bad mood anyway. I’d had a lousy-night, with a maximum of half an hour’s sleep. And I still had to make up my mind about Jerry.

Doc apologized all over and went on ahead. I followed slowly, kicking at the goddamn red sand. I was starting up the gangway when I looked over at the sled. And saw one of the sentries standing by it, talking to Robby. I let out a roar that fetched the man back at the double. It also brought the Bosun. Robby climbed onto the sled and drove off in his dust-cloud as the sentry came up and saluted. He was the Cook, doing his guard turn on O. A. He was a damn good cook and a character. But I let him have it. I gave him a pay-dock and told the Bosun to put him on the log. I said, “You may think you’re privileged. But it doesn’t extend to leave a guard post.” And then I said, “What the hell were you talking to the thing about, anyway?” I was curious.

Cookie said, “just a lot of nuclear, sir. Y’see, we’ve been figuring—arguing like—about whether he thinks or not. So I was sort of testing, you might say. Real interesting, it was. Friendly type, he turned out.”

I cut him off and sent him back to his post. I had to because I wanted to laugh. I went back into the ship and did laugh. It made me feel a whole lot better, and all at once I knew what I was going to do about Jerry. He was in his hutch, on parole. I had put the word around he was sick and might not be on duty. I went in and shut the door. He was lying on his bunk, smoking. He looked at me but didn’t say anything. I said, “For Christ sake snap out of it,” and he sat up. There must have been something about my voice, because he gave me a sickly half-grin.

I said, “I can’t afford to have you on charge. We’re undermanned anyway. So we’ll forget the whole deal, as from now.” I went over and stood by the bunk and looked down at him. “But if you blot your log again, brother, I’ll really give you the works. Full power.” I reached over and took a cigarette from the pack on his pillow.

He said, “Okay,” The grin was itself again. “But keep me away from Doctor Morbius’ family, huh?” I didn’t like the way he was looking at me. I pulled the cap off the cigarette and didn’t say anything.

He stood up. He said, “Forget it, Skipper. You’re a good jet. In spite of the way you try not to be.”

II

Up till the time I fixed it with Jerry, the day had been sort of busy, with things happening right along. But afterwards it was different. Except for Lonnie and his boys getting three parts through with rigging the transmitter, nothing happened. I mean Nothing. So much of it that all I could to was keep muddling over the whole mess in my mind—without thinking about Altaira.

Which last wasn’t possible. So I worked myself up to a pitch where I had to talk to somebody or get the heaves. Naturally, I picked on Doc. We went out for a walk. Over the hand to the rocks. It was hot today; much hotter than yesterday. We sat on the same rock we’d used when he told me that Unicorn fable. So that didn’t help me either.

We talked for an hour. And ended up where we’d started. So Morbius had delivered the lead, or something better. So I said he must have been in touch, God knows how, with his Altairian pals or keepers. So Doc didn’t agree, although he admitted I was logical. But he kept saying he couldn’t see Morbius as that much of a liar. So then I tried to figure some other way of opening Morbius up about the whole deal, and Doc said it wasn’t possible from what he could judge of the character. He said the last word really. He said maybe it was best after all to talk to Base and get some orders. That way it wouldn’t be my responsibility any more. I said he was probably right, and that was about as far as we got. Or nowhere in other words. We didn’t mention Altaira. I thought Doc was on the verge a couple of times but I managed to head him off.

It was getting hotter all the time—a sort of dead, still heat—and we started back for the ship. On the way Doc raised a point we hadn’t brought up, though maybe we’d both been thinking about it. He said, “You know, Skipper, if you do get Orders, they’ll be to take Morbius back. You said so yourself. And I was wondering how—” He stopped suddenly, as if he’d surprised himself. I said, “You mean you’re wondering how the Altairians’re going to take it,” and grinned at him. “But you don’t believe in ‘em, Doc. Remember?”

He laughed. “Maybe I meant that Force,” he said. And stopped

laughing.

We were almost back at the ship by then. We went past the tractor, and I had a bad thought. I said, “Jesus! What about that monkey? If any of the boys see that body, they’ll be asking too many questions—”

Doc said, “It’s all right. I took care of it,” and right then the Bosun came up and wanted a word with me about guard posts for the night . . .

And that was all. The rest of the day was more Nothing. And it kept getting hotter. It cooled off a little when it got dark, but not so much as it had the other nights. And the air was dead still. More so, if that was possible, than it had been the night before. Jerry said he wondered if there was a storm coming up, if they had storms on Altair-4.

I thought I wouldn’t mind a storm. It’d be something happening anyway.

“If only I’d known!” as they always say in reel three of the telaudio stories. If I’d been able to see what was coming, I might have changed my thinking.

III

I had a lousy night. Doc had his eye on me all through dinner, and when I’d taken the early watch and was ready to turn in he insisted on giving me a sedative. But the damn thing didn’t seem to work right. It put me to sleep okay. But I had the most godawful dreams. One after the other. I kept waking up, sweating with terror, but I could never remember what it was that had scared me. There was something after me, that’s all that stayed in my mind. Something I couldn’t put a name to, or a shape. The only thing I seemed sure of was a sound. Which was funny in itself; you don’t generally remember sounds out of dreams. The sound was something breathing. The thing that was chasing me, I could hear it breathing in my head minutes after I’d waked. It was very soft, but it was big. Too big. There was something wrong about it. As if it was impossible but going right on all the same.

Once—it was around zero four—I was so restless after a wake-up that I went out onto the gangway and stood there and looked all around. But everything was in order. The sentries were on the job, walking their beats. There was no sound or sight or hint of anything wrong. So I went back and climbed in my bunk again.

And went to sleep. This time without the dream. I had an hour and a half of it before I heard the general reveille being piped over the

communicator.

I was only half dressed when there was a knock at the door. An agitated sort of knock. It was the Bosun. He was breathing hard and looking his grimmest. Mr. Quinn's compliments, and would I get out to the rig as soon as I could or maybe sooner. There was something in his voice, and I pulled on a shirt and ran out, tucking it into my pants as I went.

There was a little crowd of men around the rig. I went over at the double and the mob dissolved and I was looking at Lonnie. He had a mess of plastic and metal in his hands, and he was so mad he was almost blubbering. He began to shout at me, stammering and cursing that s-some b-blood-stained b-bastard had wrecked the only irre-irreplaceable p-part—

I had to shout at him to get him calmed down. And while he was calming, I ran my eye over the rig. And didn't believe what I saw.

Somebody—something—had ripped apart the shielding Lonnie's boys had spent hours welding together. Somebody—something—had torn its way between two steel guard-bars, bending them like pretzels. And then had reached down and pulled out the klystron frequency modulator, leaving the debris Lonnie was crying over. Somebody—or something—must have used incalculable strength . . .

And whoever or whatever it was had done this without the sentries seeing or hearing anything! And then scraped all the wreckage together and put the tarpaulin cover back!

When I thought of that, I was madder than Lonnie. I told the Bosun to put all the night guard under arrest and hold them for an Inquiry. I pulled Lonnie away from the wreckage and dragged him back aboard and into the Mess and got a cup of coffee down him. I said, "That klystron modulator. You said it's irreplaceable?"

Lonnie said, "It was packed in liquid boron, in a suspended grav field. With our limited facilities, it isn't reconstructible." He wasn't stammering any more. Or cursing.

I said, "So it's impossible. How long will it take?"

He didn't think it was funny. He scratched at his chin and said, "I don't know, Skipper. Suppose I get started right away and talk to you later?"

I said, "That's the boy, Lonnie," and told him to get some breakfast. But he said he'd grab a sandwich in the workshop and shot out under full revs.

I was just going to put out a call for the Bosun, to get the Inquiry started, when Doc came in. He was sweating, and puffing some. He

said Jerry wanted to know if I'd come out and take a look at something they'd found.

So I went. There were only the sentries outside. Lonnie's boys were back in the workshop, I figured. Jerry was standing a few yards the other side of the rig. Or the remains of it. He was looking down at something in the sand. When Doc and I got up to him, he pointed at it without saying anything.

It was a hole. Maybe three feet around and a foot or so deep. But you couldn't really tell about the depth, because the sand was so soft it was trickling down from the rim. It didn't strike me as anything to write dispatches about, and I said so.

Jerry said, "Wait," and pointed ahead. About fifteen feet away was another hole, almost identical.

And they went on like that, a chain of them. For three hundred yards. Almost to the nearest group of rocks. We followed them, not talking. Up to a point about fifty feet from the rocks, then they stopped. There weren't any more of them. Not anywhere.

They had to be footprints. But what of? And where had what had made them gone to? Or come from?

We were standing by the last one. I looked at Jerry, then at Doc. I said, "The Robot?"

Jerry said, "It doesn't make tracks that big. Not so deep, and not so far apart."

Doc said, "And it doesn't move without sound, either."

I said, "How do we know it couldn't be altered?" It wasn't good, but I was thinking of the power. The welded sheeting ripped up like paper. The steel bars twisted like putty.

Jerry shook his head. "For my credits, it was an Altairian."

Doc said, "Or the Force." He wasn't being funny . . .

IV

I held the Inquiry in the Control Area. The Bosun brought two reliefs up for it. Six men. I hammered away at them, but they'd seen nothing, heard nothing. As first Watch Officer, Jerry had made the rounds twice. The Bosun, subbing for Quinn on second watch, had made three rounds. Neither of them had seen or heard anything either.

So I went into the question of beats, and how the men had been walking them. When we got it unscrambled it turned out there might have been three times—or four at the most—when the rig wasn't in

sight of any sentry and there wasn't one of them within fifty yards of it. But the maximum time this condition could ever have lasted wasn't more than a couple of minutes and probably less.

A couple of minutes for whatever-it-was to wreck the rig and cover it up again. And go away with those fifteen-foot strides? Stepping in the same footmarks it came by?

That line wouldn't even get us anywhere. So I went back to the question of sound. Hadn't anyone heard anything?

I saw one of the men look as if he was going to speak and then seem to change his mind. One of the Cadet hands, a youngster called Grey. I said, "You were going to say something. Out with it." He was jittery and didn't want to talk, but I finally got him going. He hadn't said anything about what he'd heard to anyone. He'd figured it was "just his imagination." He'd thought the other guys would think he was off grav.

I said, "For God's sake, man, what was it you heard?" and he said, "Well—it was like—like something breathing, sir."

That jolted me; and it seemed to make him more nervous still, just remembering. He said, "Something awful big—" His face was white now. "But—but there wasn't anything there, sir! There wasn't anything anyplace!"

That was all. But it was enough to make me call off the Inquiry. I didn't want the men thinking too much, speculating, so I pretended I didn't put any stock in his story. I told the Bosun the Inquiry was adjourned, the whole business to be logged as 'Under Investigation.' I told the six that went for them too.

They trooped out, and I put in a call for Doc on the communicator. While I was waiting for him, I told Jerry he was in command; I was going to see Morbius. I said, "Take Lonnie off the rig right away. Get him to set up a Standard One defense perimeter. EM fence and all."

Doc came in then, on the run. I didn't waste any time briefing him, just took him out to the tractor at the double.

I made the desert part of the trip pretty fast. So fast that Doc was holding on. We couldn't talk until I'd gotten through the rocks and slowed for the roll down into the valley. It wasn't quite so hot here and the breeze we were making felt good and cool. I pulled open the neck of my suit and told Doc we were going to try and get something out of Morbius.

"One thing's for sure," I said. "He knows more about this business than we do."

Doc said, "You still thinking it might have been the Robot?" and I

said, “How the hell do I know?” I told him about my dream and what Grey had said about hearing that breathing.

He said, “Breathing puts Robby right out of the picture.” I thought he sounded relieved, and for some reason that made me mad. I said, “How do we know it does? Maybe there’s a set of valves he uses sometimes. Maybe he wants an oil job. Maybe any damn thing. And maybe that routine he went through with my gun, and not being able to harm anybody, maybe that was all a lot of ether too!”

But Doc wasn’t buying. He said, “I don’t know, Skipper. Logic seems to be on your side, but I don’t see Morbius the way you do.”

I looked at him. He was frowning, chewing at his lip. I said, “So we’re back on the roundabout. You think it was an Altairian, but you don’t believe in Altairians. So that leaves you with this sonofabitching ‘Force.’ Okay?”

And that lasted us through the grove and around to the house-front. Morbius wasn’t on the patio waiting for us this time. No one was on the patio. Not even the Robot. It was very hot again, and very quiet. The big door was standing open, but there wasn’t a sign of anyone inside. And the sled wasn’t anywhere around.

I pulled up and we got out. We looked all over and still saw no sign of life. Not even one of Altaira’s animals. Thinking about them, I had a nasty moment remembering the titi and wondering whether she’d missed it yet.

I shrugged that off and crossed the patio and pushed the door wider and looked in. I called, “Anybody here?” a couple of times. With no result.

I went in, Doc right behind me. There was nobody in the entry. Or in the living room. There was a scarf of Altaira’s over a chair, and on the table in the dining alcove there were two cups that had been used. Doc and I stood there, and listened some more. There still wasn’t a sound. There seemed to be more of the silence inside than there had been out.

I was starting for the door at the back when Doc stopped me. He pointed across to the front of the room, at the far side from the entrance. He said, “What’s that?” and I saw something that hadn’t been there the other times. It looked like a crack in the wall, with light coming through it. But when we went over, it turned out to be a door that wasn’t quite closed. A sliding door, which fitted so well we’d never noticed it before.

I slid it right open. It gave onto a medium-sized room which had to be Morbius’ study. Very plainly furnished. A big writing table, a couple of chairs. The walls lined with cupboards, and racks full of

papers and book reels. A reading viewer in one corner, with an arm chair in front of it. Papers on the table and the chair behind it pushed back as if someone had just been working there.

We went in. And saw something that hadn't been visible from the outside. An ell to the room, running off to the back. And the end of the ell was solid rock surface, worked smoother but not painted. It was the same blue-grey as all the rocks here, the same blue-grey as the mountains themselves.

In the middle was a door. It had to be a door. A door into the rock. Doc and I looked at each other. We didn't say anything. We went up to the door. It was outlined by some sort of masonry which started out like a triangle with the apex at the top but didn't finish, the way the human eye expected it to, by using the floor as the base of the triangle. The top was maybe five and a half feet high, the greatest width about ten feet.

"It's like a conventional diamond," Doc said. "With the bottom two-thirds sawn off."

It was a weird, off-beam shape. It gave me an eerie feeling just looking at it. The actual door it framed was the same neutral dun color as the masonry, but when we touched it we found it was metal. But it wouldn't move. And we couldn't find a control anywhere.

We wandered over to the writing-table. We looked back at the door and Doc said, "Once behind there and we'd probably find the answers to all our questions."

I said, "My Altairians? Or your Force?" I tried to make a crack out of it, but Doc didn't even give me a smile.

"Maybe both," he said. "And a lot more. A whole lot more." He pulled a pencil out of his pocket and took a sheet of blank paper from a pile on the table. I wondered what the hell he was at.

He began to sketch something. An ordinary doorway first, then a man coming through it. He said, "Doors are functional. They have to be, however much you disguise 'em." He sketched the diamond doorway now, right beside the other. "What sort of a being is this shape for?" he said, and began sketching something.

He shifted as he was doing it, and I couldn't see. I moved to get a view, but he suddenly crumpled the paper up in a fist. "No," he said. "No. The hell with it!"

I didn't care. I had a feeling I didn't want to see anyway. I began looking at the papers on the table. And I found something.

I held it up. I said, "Take a look at this." It was a sheet of what looked like paper. Until you touched it and found it was metallic.

Which wasn't surprising, because metal was what it was. It was a sort of yellow-grey, and pliable as paper. But you couldn't tear it. It was covered with some sort of writing, or figuring, in black characters. Very black.

They looked like hieroglyphics to me. I said so, but Doc shook his head. He took the sheet and studied it, moving nearer the window. He said, "Not if you *mean* hieroglyphics. These symbols aren't like anything that ever came from Earth. As Quinn would say, they aren't terra-shape—"

He never finished. He was interrupted by Morbius' voice. "Good morning, gentlemen,"—and we whipped around to see him standing there close to us. He must have come through the door in the rock, but it was closed again. It hadn't made a sound.

His face was dead white and his eyes looked on fire. His mouth was twisted to one side. He said, "My use of the word 'gentlemen' was purely satiric. May I ask whether you have been over the rest of the house? Perhaps you would like me to show you where my daughter keeps her jewels—"

I cut in on him. He wasn't the only one who could get mad. I said, "We're here on duty, Doctor Morbius. Last night someone—something—got past our sentries. And wrecked our transmitter rig. We came here to find out what you know about it—"

I didn't get any further. His face got whiter and he'd have folded if he hadn't grabbed the edge of the table.

Doc got hold of him and put him in a chair. He slumped. His eyes were closed, but when Doc pushed back his sleeve and felt for his pulse, he sat up and pulled the arm away.

He said, "Tell me what happened. Everything that happened."

I told him. He put a hand over his eyes and mumbled something. It sounded like, "So it's starting again—"

He looked at me. "And you suspect me?" he said. "Is that why you're here?"

I said, "Listen, Dr. Morbius—everything we've seen since we landed on this planet goes to prove you're in touch with some native intelligence. You're either friendly with it, or it's in charge of you. It stands to reason you must know something about what happened last night."

He said, "Your logic is faulty, Commander. I know nothing of the invasion . . . However, when you say I am in touch with what you term a native intelligence, you are speaking the truth."

It came out so quickly I couldn't believe I'd heard it. I looked at Doc

and saw he was gaping like a kid at a launching base.

Morbius put his hands on the chair-arms and pushed himself up. He was stooped a bit, but he seemed all right. He leaned over the table and picked up the sheet of metal paper.

“This,” he said, “and the writing on it, was made by the inhabitants of this planet.” He put it down on the table again. Very carefully. He might have been handling a piece of lunar crystalite. He said, “The date? More than two thousand of our centuries ago . . .”

He let that sink in a minute. His face was still white, like a wax dummy’s. But he was standing straight again. He seemed taller than I’d figured him. He had the damnedest expression on his face—

FIVE

Edward Morbius

I had to tell them—and show them . . .

Perhaps I had withheld too long, but now my hand was forced. Their suspicions, their puerile reasoning, the shape of events, everything made revelation imperative.

My mind still retained vestigial infantilities which, now the moment I had dreaded was here, made it possible for me to take satisfaction in their bewilderment, their childish awe, the inevitable recognition which must come to them of their abysmal inferiority.

I watched them trying to absorb, to comprehend, everything that one speech of mine had implied. The youth Adams maintained his look of militaristic belligerence, but behind it I could sense the undeveloped mind struggling to adjust preconceived ideas. About the man Ostrow I was not so sure. Behind his mask of social understanding I could feel the effort of adjustment, but he seemed to be accepting its necessity. With a calmness which told at least of self-control he said to me, “You’re going to tell us,” in a way which made the words neither a question nor a statement.

I marshaled my thoughts. It was no simple task to convey in a few words, to these circumscribed minds, even a concept of this tremendous history.

I said at last, “This planet was the cradle and habitat of a race of beings who called themselves the Krell. Through the endless web of time they developed to a point at which—ethically, technologically, in fact in every conceivable and inconceivable way—they were uncountable eons ahead of Man as he stands today. And this point they had reached two hundred thousand years ago . . .

“Having outstripped man’s conception of what he terms civilization, having banished from their lives all baseness, the Krell lived for and in the acquisition of knowledge. Turning outward, they sought to unlock not only the secrets of the Universe, but of Nature itself. There is every reason to believe that, in search of the great key, they journeyed across space to other worlds, even to the Solar system and that little planet called Earth, before Man had even begun to emerge from

bestiality—"

I checked, interrupted by Adams. Unable to assimilate the total concept, he had seized like a child upon one infinitesimal point which conveyed some meaning to him. He did not speak to me, but to Ostrow. "Maybe that explains the animals," he said. "Maybe they brought them back—"

"Or their forerunners," Ostrow said. He was looking at me. "They—the Krells weren't interested, I suppose, in anything so primitive as Pithecanthropus?"

I went on as if they had not spoken. "Their explorations ended," I said, "the Krell appear to have achieved the very last pinnacles of knowledge, with only the ultimate peak left to ascend and conquer. But then—" my voice shook uncontrollably—"but then, at this crowning point in their great, their truly miraculous history, this godlike race was destroyed. In one night of unknown, unimaginable disaster they were wiped from existence . . ."

I was holding them now. Their gaze was fixed upon my face; they made no sound nor movement. I said, "And through the endless centuries since that frightful disaster, all trace of the Krell and their works has vanished from the face of this planet. Even the cities, with their cloud-piercing towers of glittering translucent metal—even these have crumbled back into the soil. No remnant of that mighty civilization remains above the ground . . ."

I waited. I knew what I had to say next, and what I had to do. I had gone too far to draw back. But I seemed unable to force myself to the inevitable step. Until I saw questions forming themselves behind the two watching faces; puerile, time-destroying questions.

I moved then. I turned toward the door in the rock. "But beneath the ground, gentlemen," I said, "carved from the very heart of the mountains, there is left the very heart of those magnificent labors . . ."

They followed me to the door, Adams eagerly, Ostrow more slowly. I detected a reluctance in him, and I could feel again that he was studying me. It occurred to me that perhaps I had not brought myself down sufficiently near to their level, and I made an effort to remedy this, endeavoring to make my tone and manner more those of friendly exposition.

I slid back the door, pointing out the metal and telling them of its everlasting strength and well-nigh unbelievable molecular density. I led them through and told how the door could be sealed by the Rho-ray lock against all attempt to enter. I led them along the narrow corridor and saw in their faces the dawning of bemazed, incredulous wonder.

Our footsteps echoing, we came to the second archway. Stooping, I led the way through, then stood aside to watch them as they had their first sight of the laboratory chamber.

They stared around, unbelieving, struck silent like children faced by a first glimpse of life's wonders. I said, "This is one of the Krell laboratories. By no means the largest, my researches show, but infinitely the most important—"

Once more Adams interrupted me. "Not the largest!" he repeated. "But it's—it's tremendous!" Again the infantile mind had clutched at the unimportant to steady itself.

I was patient with him. "Size, Commander," I said, "is purely relative, a matter only of scale. You have not yet adjusted your ideas."

It was Ostrow's turn. "You say a Krell laboratory?" he said to me. "But this equipment—the lighting—everything—It all seems new! As if it hadn't been in existence more than a few years—"

He stopped as he saw my expression. I said to him, with all the deliberation at my command, "Everything that you see here, Major Ostrow, everything that you are going to see—every instrument, every device—has stood unchanged since its construction." I tried to smile at him. "It is a matter of what human engineers, with their unimaginative nomenclature, would call self-maintenance. Guarded here against all elemental destructiveness, everything has existed in perfection for these two thousand centuries."

There was no reply. Both of them were too much engaged in using their sense of sight to exercise the power of speech. Watching them, I tried to remember my own impressions upon first seeing the chamber. But they were vague, misty.

I said at last, "In a little while, gentlemen, when you are over the first shock of wonderment, when your minds accept what your eyes are seeing—then you will have a new cause for wonder, I am sure. You will realize that many of the integers of what you are seeing are by no means unfamiliar." I pointed to illustrate my words. "Although not built for human use, much of the equipment must be familiar to the eye of anyone who has ever been inside a laboratory of electro-physics. Particularly those massive banks of relays with their recurrent and ever-changing flashes . . ."

Again I had to pause. They were still gaping. I saw Adams—once more the infant mind was clutching for non-essential familiarities—glance upward toward the domed roof of rock. I said, "Yes, Commander—the lighting is indirect, and from above. Also—and this would be the one inexplicable point, even to your Chief Devisor—it is permanent." I saw Ostrow look at me quickly, and realized that, with

Adams especially, I must be careful of my tone.

I said quickly, "There are, of course, some devices which will strike no note of familiarity. And those are the outward signs of the Krell superiority—"

This time it was Ostrow who stopped me. He pointed and said, "That, for instance. What is it?"

I had less trouble in smiling at him now. I said, "Perhaps the greatest of all the treasures here. Without it, I would know nothing of the Krells, not even the little I have told you."

I walked over to the apparatus and they followed me. I demonstrated for them as I talked. I said, "The top of this desk-like protrusion is a screen. Upon it can be projected a written record of the total knowledge of the race, from its primitive beginnings to the tremendous height it had attained by the time of their destruction. A library, in fact; a storehouse of learning the like of which Creation has never seen before . . ."

I showed them the great, console-like control board. I said, "These are the contacts which, when their proper use has been learned, are the key to the storehouse . . ." I manipulated a combination, and the screen glowed with life, showing a page of the simpler characters as notations to a geometric diagram. "It was from this theorem," I said, "that I began to deduce the vast but logical Krell alphabet. That was almost two decades ago, and for every day of those years I have come here. My sole purpose—to learn, to learn! To amass knowledge." My hands played with the contacts as I talked, bringing new pages to the screen. "And still I feel like some illiterate savage wandering dazedly through some stupendous scientific institution, not comprehending a thousandth part of its wonders . . .

"It was months before I discovered one of the basic aims of the Krell, but when I had, I began to master the primary techniques, and applied them. My first experiment was to construct the Robot which —" I could not resist a glance at Adams—"has apparently impressed you. Let me assure you, that was child's play. Since then, in every hour of every day of every year that I have spent with this treasure-chest of knowledge, I have learned new concepts, new techniques—"

I was checked. First by Adams, who said, "This is too big. It can't be evaluated all at once. It—"

And then by Ostrow, who seemed to glance warningly at the younger man before he spoke. Ostrow said, "You spoke of the 'basic aim' of the Krells, Doctor Morbius. What was it?"

He was watching me, studying me. I considered my answer for a long moment. In his undeveloped way, the man had intelligence. I

said, carefully, “My actual words, Major, were ‘one of the basic aims.’ I was referring to the Krell’s objective of lessening, and eventually eliminating, all dependence upon physical instrumentalities.”

He frowned, his mind grappling with the concept. Adams—and for once I was glad of his presence—put in his word again. Surprisingly, it showed a certain grasp of essentials.

He said, “Twenty years doesn’t seem so long, Doctor. Not in relation to—” he made a gesture—“to all this.” Groping for words, he was not so blunt as usual. He said, “I can’t understand how you could—could absorb all the physical science stuff. I mean, you weren’t trained that way—”

I said, “A shrewd thought, Commander.” A little flattery could not, I felt, do anything but good. “However, if you will follow me, I will show you the answer to the problem . . .”

I moved as I was speaking, leading the way toward the center of the chamber. We had not so much as approached it yet, and I doubt whether they had even noticed the sunken, rail-surrounded island and what it contained. I stood by one of the low, wide seats—those seats so plainly not designed for human use—and turned, and watched their reactions as they drew level.

More starings. More wordlessness. More childish frowns of non-comprehension. And, most surely, renewed realization of their own inadequacy . . .

I let them stare for a while before I spoke. And when I did speak, I was careful to keep my tone on the same note of friendly, matter-of-fact exposition.

I said, “What you are looking at now, gentlemen—this whole area and the devices it contains—represent to me the focal point, the ultimate funnel, as it were, of all that you have seen here, of all that you will see when I take you deeper into the heart of the mountain, of all the lore in that great library . . .”

I checked myself. Their eyes were only watchful, there was no light of comprehension in them. I said, “Perhaps I am trying to go too fast, to over-simplify.” I looked at Adams. “We will attack the question another way, Commander—by telling you that this device—” I leaned over the rail and unhooked the head-piece and pulled it up into view at the end of its glittering cord—“this device will answer your question as to how my untrained mind could assimilate such advanced, such more-than-human, experiments in physics . . .”

They crowded closer and I waved them to seats beside me. They had something new to gape at now. The headpiece, with its three gleaming electrodes at the end of their flexible arms.

“This instrument,” I said, “is denoted in the Krell writings by symbols which would translate, approximately, as The Gateway.” I slipped it onto my head, adjusting the arms. “It has many functions, but at this moment we need only consider one of them. This being, strangely enough, the least important . . .”

I pointed to the switches. “We will take the least first. It is simply a means of measuring the power of the mind. Consider those words, gentlemen. They cover more than their simplicity might lead you to believe.”

Adams said, “You mean it’s a sort of super I.Q. test?”

“Exactly, Commander.” I found I could even smile at him now. I pressed the first switch. “If you’ll look at that panel on the left—”

They stared at the panel. I said, “You will see that approximately a third of the board is glowing. Among the Krell that would have placed me, I imagine, as hardly better than a moron.”

There was speculation in Ostrow’s eye. He said, “May I try it?”

I cut the switch and took off the headpiece. I said, “By all means,” and fitted it on him. Adams suppressed a movement; I could feel suspicion of me welling up in him.

I said, “There is no danger, Commander.” I did not look at him. I pressed the switch—and a few inches at the bottom of the board glowed.

Ostrow said, “And my official I.Q.’s one sixty-one!” He smiled ruefully, staring at the board.

I looked at Adams. “Would the Commander care to take the test?”

For the first time I saw a smile on his face. It was directed at Ostrow, not at me. He said to Ostrow, “I won’t bother. Leave you guessing—”

He said something to me, but I did not hear it. Because I saw that Ostrow, still with the activated electrodes upon his head, was leaning over the rail and peering at the other switches. He put out a hand toward them and said, “What are these other contacts? What do *they* do? What’s this white one?”

I thought he might touch it. I clutched at his wrist and pulled his hand away. I said, “Be careful, Major. Be very careful!” I took the headpiece, and lifted it from his head. I leaned over and cut off the first switch.

Again they stared at me. I was growing tired of those blank, half-suspicious eyes. I said, “You must excuse my nervousness. But you are trifling with dangers you cannot appreciate.” I pointed. “That white switch—subject yourself to the power it liberates and you are asking

for death!" I found that my hands were shaking. I said, "It was fatal to the Commander of our expedition. And I myself experienced—"

Adams said, "You told us everybody was killed by a 'Force.' " He made a gesture. "Is all this what you meant by 'Force'?"

I had to choke down rage. I said, "No. At the time you saw fit to question me, I realized it would be—" I reshaped my thought—"I realized that, newly arrived in a strange world as you were, you would not be ready to assimilate too many and differing concepts."

His eyes were hard with suspicion. But before he could speak again, Ostrow put in his word. He shot Adams a glance, and then said to me, "You were going to say something else, Doctor. About yourself and this—this machine—"

I was grateful for the interruption. "I myself also experimented," I said. "It was in the days when my wife and I were alone. Before my house was built over the mouth of this excavation . . .

"At that time my brain-pattern on that panel was only a fraction of what it is today. But then one day I cut in the circuit controlled by the white switch, releasing its full power—" I hesitated, on the point of telling them of those first sensations of magical expansion, of standing upon the brink of understanding. But I checked the urge. I said, "I subjected myself to the full power for too long. Fortunately I had enough sense of self-preservation left to tear off the headpiece before I collapsed. But I lay unconscious for a day and a night, and had to be nursed back to health . . ."

Adams said. "But it didn't kill you." He had returned to blunt brutality. "You were 'immune' again. The way you were to this other 'Force'—"

Once more I saw Ostrow dart a warning glance at him. Ostrow said, "You hadn't finished, Doctor Morbius. I think you were going to tell us of some other effect besides your illness."

I said, "Exactly. When I used the indicator again, I discovered that my mental capacity had more than doubled."

"And you used the white switch again," Ostrow said. Like that earlier remark of his, it was neither statement nor question but something in between the two.

I said, "Of course. But with the greatest caution." I turned to Adams. "There you have the full answer to your question of how my mind was able to assimilate—"

I saw that he was not listening to me. He was staring past me, at the great pillar of the central gauge. He pointed to it. "What does that register?" he said. "It's been active all the time we've been here. But it

showed heavier when you were using that head-set.”

I was surprised by the sharpness of his observation. To the eyes of most laymen, the pillar would have seemed purely architectural. I said, “For the first of what will probably be many times, Commander, I cannot fully answer your question.” I crossed to where we could see more clearly, and they followed me.

I said, “I know, of course, that it is a gauge. And I know that it registers the presence—the presence upon this planet—of life and power. Mental power. For instance, its basic registration has been many units higher since you and your companions arrived. But why use of the headset apparatus should register additionally, I don’t yet know, though my present course of study must inevitably lead me to the answer very soon.”

They stared at the gauge, and Ostrow remarked upon its divisions, and again Adams surprised me. He said to Ostrow, “Sure. They’re in decimal series, I guess. With each block recording ten times the one before.” He looked at me and said, “Right?”

I said, “Precisely.”

Ostrow said, “But what are the units, Doctor?”

I said, “Why not call them amperes, Major?”

He smiled. “ ‘A volt by any other name.’ ”

“For Christ’s sake!” Adams was not amused. He looked at the gauge again; then at me. He said, “That’s a hell of a big gauge, with damn small calibrations. The total power must be—” He frowned. “Must be getting on for infinite.” His frown deepened as he tried to envisage the unthinkable.

Ostrow said, “God knows I’m no scientist. No mathematician either. But I want to know something—”

He paused a moment—and then asked the question I had either been hoping for or dreading. I did not know which. He said, “Doctor Morbius, what is the source of the power?”

Yet again, my hand was being forced. I had to show them now. I began to feel a fierce joy in contemplating their reactions.

“I will show you,” I said. They must have seen something in my face which told them they stood upon yet another threshold of experience. Because they said nothing; they merely followed me, half-expectant, half-wary.

I led them the full length of the chamber, to the door in the far corner of the inner rock-face. I broke the Rho-ray with my hand and the door slid open to reveal the conveyer car, poised and waiting. I pulled back the transparent hood and stood aside and told them to get

in. They hesitated, and Adams came forward and looked down the tube-like tunnel, where the lights struck gleams from the single rail in an endless diminuendo.

Ostrow entered the car first, and I waved him to the far seat. I took the center, facing the controls. I waited, and in a moment Adams took the seat on my right. I pressed the hood-switch and the transparent shell slid back into place over our heads.

I said, “Our speed will be very high, gentlemen, but there is barely a sensation of movement.” I made great effort to keep my voice and tone normal, matter-of-fact. But I glanced at their faces, and saw what I wanted to see.

I made the starting contact. There was that one instant of pressure, with one’s back thrust against the seat as if by some great invisible hand; then release and the humming gentle sway of the journey . . .

Neither of them spoke, but I could see them—Adams particularly—continually glancing to the sides of the tunnel. They could not, of course, see anything but a blur of lights. But I knew they were calculating, consciously or unconsciously; time and distance, time and speed, time and speed and distance . . .

I set the dial to stop at the first great transverse. The humming changed, its note deepening. The pace began to slacken, so that the lights were no longer a blurring chain but entities growing wider and wider apart. The smooth surface of the rock shone dully around them . . .

We came out of the tube, the wheels of the conveyer barely moving, and rolled to a stop at the edge of the first shaft. I released the hood and it rolled back.

And I watched them as their eyes, at first glazed with the shock of what they were seeing, slowly cleared. Cleared only to fix themselves again in absorbed but half-rejected wonder.

They looked up the first vast shaft, and down it. And then across to the second, over the slender bridge spanning the seemingly bottomless chasm. And everywhere—up and down and across—their eyes met nothing but that endless, monstrous and beautiful monotony. The almost infinite repetition of the units, housed in their gleaming metal sheaths—side by side, head to foot—as far and farther than any eye could reach . . .

And each unit with its glowing relay rippling on and off in a perpetual pattern of light, ever-changing, always the same . . .

I reached across Adams and opened the door of the car. He looked at me with a start, almost as if I had wakened him from sleep. We did not speak, but he slid out and stood on the platform beside the

monorail. I followed him, and Ostrow came close on my heels.

Still none of us spoke. I led the way out onto the bridge. We stood in the center and they gripped at the rail and went on using their eyes, forcing their minds to believe what they were seeing. Adams looked down, and shuddered and closed his eyes for a moment. Ostrow muttered something under his breath.

I said, “You are looking down twenty miles, Commander.” My voice echoed weirdly.

I pointed upward. “And we are twenty miles from the surface.”

I turned, throwing out my arm to point across the bridge. “Another twenty miles . . .”

I said, “We are in the outer shaft. There are four hundred shafts in all—identical with this . . .”

Ostrow said, “It’s—it’s unthinkable! . . . One vast machine—a twenty-mile cube of it!” His voice was hushed, and its echoes were stranger than the echoes of my voice.

Adams said, “So it’s big. So that’s not what we came to see.” He was staring at me.

I said, “This, Commander, is merely a wayside stop.” I was surprised by the juvenility of my feelings toward him; unashamed that I should feel pleasure at his discomposure.

I led the way back to the conveyer. We sat as before. I closed the hood and warned them. I said, “From here there is a much steeper drop. You may be—uncomfortable.”

Without waiting for them to reply, I made the starting contact, and pushed the lever over for top speed. We flashed across the transverse in a breath, and were in the tube of rock again and pitching downward at a pace which brought the humming almost to the pitch of a scream. There was no gentle swaying to our progress now but an awful steadiness as our bodies were thrust back—plastered back—against the seats . . .

I had never dared this speed before. I began to fear that I would pass our mark and eased the lever back—and back.

We began to slow. The shriek merged downward into the humming. The pressure on my body eased, and I felt the gentle sway of the car again . . .

We stopped, only a yard or so ahead of my usual spot. There was the alcove in the rock-wall, its light shining through its meshed-metal screen.

I drew a deep breath. I did not look at either of my passengers as I spoke. I said, “We are so deep here, gentlemen, that heat and pressure

variations may trouble you. But don't be alarmed, there are no lasting effects."

I released the hood, and Adams opened the door beside him and we stepped out onto the narrow platform. There was nothing here for them to see; only the endless low arching of the tunnel, its rock gleaming dull under the lamps.

I said, "We are standing some fifty miles beneath the surface of the planet," and heard Ostrow catch his breath and some muttered indistinguishable word from Adams. Their faces glistened with moisture, their breathing was harsh and fast.

I broke the ray-lock and pushed back the screen. I stepped up into the alcove, beckoning them to join me.

They stared at the bulbous excrescence upon one wall, and the mouth of the funnel-like scope which sprang from the floor to face it.

"More miles below us—" I pointed to the rock beneath our feet—"is the answer to that question of Major Ostrow's which brought us here. The source of power." I reached out and released the cover of the great mirror, and then swung the mirror itself down upon its supports until it locked.

I said, "Look in that mirror—and nowhere else. Nowhere else!"

They stared at me, and Ostrow murmured, " 'Thou canst not look upon the Gorgon's face and live,' " and took Adams by the arm and turned him to face the mirror.

I stood beside them and touched the switch that slid back the cover from the mouth of the funnel in the floor behind us . . .

This was the moment I had waited for; the moment when, as they looked into the mirror, I should look at their faces. But I did not. I could not. I should have known that the fascination of that terrible, that awe inspiring sight would hold me oblivious of all else. As it had before. As it always must . . .

The sea of leaping flame, shot through with every color of the greater spectrum . . . The mouth of hell—or the gateway to Godhead . . .

I do not know how long we stood there—but at last I reached for the switch and closed it and heard the cover slide into place over the scope behind us.

The mirror was blank again, and I was free. Now I looked at the faces; they were bloodless and glistening with sweat, the eyes wide and gazed. When I spoke I could see the effort it cost to focus not only the eyes themselves but the minds behind them.

I said, "Does that answer the question? . . . Power the equal of ten

thousand nuclear reactors in tandem . . . The power of an exploding star . . . Cosmic power . . .”

They looked at each other, and then at me. They still did not speak. I led the way out of the alcove and locked the screen in position. I staggered as I turned to the car, and realized suddenly that I had reached a dangerous pitch of exhaustion.

Ostrow put out a hand as if to help me, but I brushed it aside.

I leant over the car and turned the seats around, finding that I had to support myself with a hand upon the door. With a great effort I stood straight and gestured to Ostrow.

He climbed into the car without a word, but as I took the center seat beside him, Adams behind me, I saw that he was studying me again. And now with the physically appraising eye of his profession.

I was determined to show no weakness. I made a slow business of neutralizing the control set I had used on the journey down; then was slower still in uncovering the set I must use on the return.

I said, “We are going back to the surface,” exercising care to keep my voice at its previous pitch. “There may be small discomfort as the pressure alters, and the temperature—”

I had intended to go on; to tell them they need not be alarmed. But it became too great an effort . . .

I pressed the hood switch—and then, when we were covered, made the starting contact . . .

I was conscious all the time of Ostrow’s eyes, watching me—

SIX

Major C. X. Ostrow

I was anxious about Morbius. He looked a sick man and I couldn't stop myself wondering what we would do if he collapsed before we reached the surface again . . .

But he didn't. In fact, he seemed to pick up the moment we began to mount and the temperature and pressure started to ease. And when the car stopped, and we found ourselves back at the door to the laboratory, he seemed to be at least as well as he had been when we started on that unbelievable journey.

He led the way through the laboratory and back to his study, and through that to the living-room. The Robot was standing by the rear door, and somehow the sight of him—of it—was startling. Morbius waved us to chairs and dropped onto a settee himself. He said, "Robby—wine," and the thing turned and went out and I realized this was the first time any one of us had spoken since we'd turned away from that indescribable sight fifty miles under our feet.

And none of us spoke now. The Robot came back, with a wine decanter and glasses on a tray. For me there was still an uncanny quality about his butler-like efficiency. He filled the glasses, and handed them to us. He set the decanter down on a table near Morbius—and went out again.

Adams drained his glass and sat forward in his chair. I wondered what he was going to say.

He said to Morbius, "The Krells' objective was to do without physical instrumentalities?"

Morbius said, "That is correct, Commander."

Adams said, "That's one hell of an instrument you've just been showing us."

Morbius flushed. It was a dark, purplish flush and I didn't like it. He didn't speak.

I gave Adams a warning glance. I said, "Maybe they had to have it. To teach themselves how to do without it."

Morbius stared at me. The flush leaving his face too quickly, he

said, “You see glimmerings of the truth, Major.”

Adams’ face was set, completely expressionless. He said, “We shouldn’t be fooling around trying to get in audio touch with Base. This thing’s too big. It ought to be reported on. Fully, and right away.” He kept his eyes on Morbius. “You ought to know that, sir. No one man can monopolize a great discovery this way.”

Morbius came to his feet in one convulsive movement. He said, “I’ve been expecting that from you, Commander, ever since I was forced to show you some of the work of the Krell.” His face was white, even his lips. “What do you mean to do? Try and take me back, whether I am willing or not? So that I can waste years explaining the inexplicable to fools!”

Adams said, “What else can I do? Report you’re working out the secrets of the universe? And that maybe you’ll give out with the recipe—when you’re good and ready?”

Morbius began to pace, his hands clenched at his sides. He was making a terrific effort to control himself.

He said, “For nearly twenty years, Commander—ever since I first began to study the lore of the Krell—I have debated this question with myself. Dispassionately, I hope, and examining every facet of the problem.”

He paused, staring into Adams’ face as if he were trying to read his thoughts. He said, slowly and deliberately, “I have come to the inevitable, the unalterable conclusion that Man is not yet ready, not yet fit, to receive such knowledge.” He stopped abruptly, keeping his eyes on Adams’.

Adams said, “Mankind isn’t ready, huh? But the great Doctor Morbius is?”

The dark flush stained Morbius’ face again, and he turned away with a violent, oddly futile gesture. I could see his whole body trembling.

I said quickly, “Maybe Doctor Morbius has special qualifications,” and shot Adams another warning look.

But if he saw it, he ignored it. He stood up to face Morbius. “Let’s go back a bit,” he said. “To what brought me here—the sabotage last night. You will say you had nothing to do with it? Know nothing about it? Can’t even guess?”

The blood ebbed from Morbius’ face, leaving only an ugly patch over each cheekbone.

“You fool!” he said suddenly. “I warned you, didn’t I? Before you ever landed your ship, I warned you—”

"You mean your mysterious 'Force'?" Adams said. "You mean that's on the loose again?"

It was the tone more than the words that proved the last straw. Morbius raised his clenched hands above his head, and I thought for an instant he was going to smash them into Adams' face. "You—you—" he began, but then rage seemed to choke him and he suddenly staggered . . . I just got to him in time. I grabbed him and eased him back to the settee and down onto it.

"What the hell—" said Adams from behind me, and I told him savagely to shut up and bent over Morbius.

His eyes were closed, and his breathing was too fast and too light. I unbuttoned the collar of his tunic and felt for his pulse. It was heavy and irregular, I said to Adams, "Get the emergency-kit from the tractor. Quick."

He was hardly out of the room before Morbius was struggling to sit up. His eyes were open and he was mumbling something. I heard, ". . . so tired . . . so tired . . ."

Gently, I pushed him back against the cushions. I said, "It's all right—take it easy—"

I loosened another button of the tunic and lifted his legs up until he was lying straight. He watched me all the time. His eyes were eminently sane, but they had a gaze on them which bore out the snap diagnosis my mind had already made.

"Tired—" he muttered again. ". . . too tired . . ." That was the clincher. Until another doctor came along, my patient was suffering from complete exhaustion, nervous and otherwise.

Adams came back with the emergency kit, and as soon as Morbius saw him he started trying to sit up. He said, "Commander—I insist—if you doubt my word—"

I waved at Adams and he moved back out of sight. I got Morbius lying down once more. I said to him, "Just take it easy now . . . Do as I say and you'll be all right . . ."

He started to speak, but gave it up as too much effort. His eyes closed.

I moved quietly away from the couch and joined Adams. He was standing by the window, looking out, but turned quickly as I came up. I said, very low, "I'm in charge for the moment. Get the hell outside while I put him to bed."

"What's the matter with him?" His tone matched mine.

"Looks like exhaustion," I said. "Whatever it is, you're not helping it any—"

"Sure it isn't an act, Doc?"

"Don't be a fool; do what I tell you!" I gripped him by the arm. "Think where you'd be if he had a stroke and died on us!"

That got him. He gave me one of his sudden grins and said, "Okay, Doc—okay."

He walked out into the entrance hall, and I heard the big door open and close.

I went back to my patient. He was trying to sit up again. I quieted him and opened the kit, my shoulder turned so that he couldn't see what I was doing.

While I filled a syringe he started talking, his voice thick and blurred. He said, "Doctor—doctor—I don't want to go to sleep . . . I don't want to go to sleep!"

There was no point in fighting him. I said smoothly, "Who's going to put you to sleep? . . . We want to wake you up." I showed him the syringe. "And this is the stuff to do it!"

He eyed me suspiciously, but let me push back his sleeve. He winced a little as the needle jabbed into his arm.

In less than a minute, he was out. So dead asleep that even a Krell couldn't have waked him.

I stood up and put the syringe back in the kit. I lit a cigarette and looked down at the man and thought he should be in bed. I wondered where Altaira was. She ought to be told about her father, and he ought to be left alone for at least twelve hours, and I ought to be told where his bedroom was.

I considered finding Robby and getting him to help me. But then it occurred to me that I'd have to *activate* him, and somehow the idea didn't appeal to me . . .

I went outside for Adams. I was sure he'd be on the patio, but he wasn't. The tractor was in my way and I walked out onto the blue-grey track and around it.

And then the silence hit me. There was too much of it.

It made me realize what a terrifying adjective *unearthly* could be.

I looked uneasily around at the house, and the windows stared back at me. I looked out across the grassy stretch where we'd watched Altaira and her animals, and there was nothing but the grass. Suddenly, I found I didn't like its color. I wanted it to be green instead of gold. I wanted the sky to be blue, and the hot sunlight yellow . . .

I started toward the grove of trees which lined the road, but when I'd gone a few yards changed my mind for no reason and started

across toward the pool.

I found I was almost running, and forced myself to stop. I was just about at the point where Altaira had stood to feed her animals when the thought struck me that I might shout. In the silence my voice ought to carry for miles.

I was cupping my hands around my mouth, and filling my lungs, when I suddenly saw him.

He was less than a hundred yards away, pacing slowly up and down the paved walk on the far side of the pool, appearing and reappearing through the screen of the shrubbery. His hands were thrust into his pockets, his head was bent. He was so deep in thought I doubted he even knew where he was.

Seeing him made everything feel very different. I was thankful I hadn't shouted, and instead of thinking about myself I began thinking about him. No wonder he was pacing. Even yesterday he'd had enough on his mind to frighten a Marshal, let alone a young SE Commander. And look what today had brought! The added, the incalculable responsibility of finding that Morbius was the sole holder of knowledge which must be communicated to Mankind!

And Morbius was sick. And Morbius would fight against sharing his knowledge. And there was no one to decide how he should be dealt with; no one except Commander John Justin Adams . . .

And, unless I had missed my best guess, John Justin Adams was in love with Morbius' daughter.

I started toward the pool. But I'd only gone a step or so when I stopped dead in my tracks. As if my thinking about her had conjured her, there was Altaira, face to face with Adams just as he emerged into my line of sight again. She had come from the trees behind the pool, and her arms were full of flowers she had been gathering. They were great red-and-purple blossoms on long white stems, and she was looking down at them.

Neither of them saw the other until they had almost collided. They were only a pace apart when they stopped, and raised their heads, and stared at each other, motionless.

There was something about the little tableau—an exquisite tension, a purely natural drama of line and color—that held me as still as they were. They hadn't seen me, and wouldn't. So it was plain I must either get out of there or hail them.

But I didn't move. I went on watching them.

I don't know how long it was they stood there, gazing at each other. But I do know they didn't speak. Although they were too far away for

me to hear or even see, I knew that. There was something defiant in the way they looked; some nuance of posture which made me know—particularly about Altaira—that there was conflict here; conflict I knew nothing about . . .

Then the whole static picture burst into movement. She did speak—and as she spoke she started to turn away . . .

And then Adams moved for the first time. His hand shot out and caught her by the shoulder. She faced him again, her head flung back as if in protest . . .

And then her arms opened, and the flowers fell at her feet. And his arms went around her and hers went around his shoulders and they were locked in a kiss . . .

I came to myself. I turned quickly away and started back toward the house. My feet made no sound in the grass, but I found myself walking on tiptoe . . .

I was nearly back to the tractor when I looked around. I couldn't help it.

I could see them through the shrubs. They were walking away from the pool, slowly, and Adams' arm was around the girl as they walked.

They disappeared into the trees . . .

II

I went back into the house. I didn't mind the thought of Robby so much now, and started looking for him. He was standing, startlingly dead-seeming, just behind the rear door to the living room. I activated him by using his name, and he not only showed me Morbius' room but carried him there.

It was a small, monastic place, just off the corridor which led back from the living room. When we had my still sleeping patient in bed I sent Robby out and checked the man's heart and respiration and blood pressure. They were all much better than I'd expected, and when I'd made sure he was lying comfortably I went out of the room myself.

And was faced with a problem I hadn't contemplated. Robby was activated; how did one de-activate him?

The answer was simple, but it only came to me after I'd kept myself busy for half an hour thinking up orders to give him. For some reason, I found he made me more uncomfortable 'alive' and waiting, with that one light glowing behind the louvres, than he did as an inanimate hunk looming in a corner.

He gave me the answer himself—because I asked him. I said, “Robby—how do I switch you off?” and he told me, whirring and clicking. It was as easy as that. I said, “That’s all now—” and it was. He stood there, a dead lump of metal again.

Then I sat by the windows, looking out over the patio and smoking one cigarette after the other and trying to keep awake by telling myself this was no time to get tired . . .

I was on my second or third cigarette when I thought I heard the distant spit-crack-hiss of a D-R pistol. I jumped up and ran to the entry and pulled open the door . . .

And stopped on the threshold, wondering whether I’d dreamed the sound. There was something so absolute about the silence that somehow I couldn’t imagine it had just been broken, and the more I thought, the less certain I was that I had really heard it . . .

But then I saw Adams and Altaira. They were walking toward the house over the gold-tinted turf. They were very close together.

But they hadn’t seen me, and I backed in and closed the door, slowly and quietly, and crossed to the rear of the living room and sat myself in a big chair.

They arrived a moment or two before I thought they would. I did a good job of not hearing them until they were right in the room and then jumped up and said I hadn’t heard them come in.

They weren’t close together now, of course, but there was no mistaking their new relationship. It crackled between them like the EM waves of the fence that by this time Quinn and Farman must have set up around the ship.

But then I saw Altaira had been crying; tears were still welling in her eyes. They didn’t fit the sentimental picture I’d been building in my mind and I blurted out, “What’s the matter?” before I realized this could possibly be the worst thing to say.

But she smiled at me and said, “Please forgive me. I know I’m being foolish—” and gulped down a sob and looked across at Adams and said, “Please—you tell him—please . . .”

Adams said, “It was Khan—that tiger of hers. We—we’d been—we were coming out of the woods back there—and it was going to spring at her. It was out to kill. Luckily I saw it in time—”

He seemed to be bogging down and I said, “So I did hear a D-R. I thought I’d been dreaming . . .”

Adams said, “I couldn’t help it. I had to do it—I had to!” He was speaking to me, but he was looking at the girl.

She gave him a smile which made me know the picture I’d been

drawing for myself was right after all.

She said, "Of course you did, J—" She started to say his name but caught herself. She looked at me. She said, "How is Father, Major Ostrow?"

I didn't know what to say. I hadn't been expecting the question, and I wondered how much—or how little—Adams had told her.

He cut in before I could speak. He said quickly, "I told her about you checking him, Doc. And finding he was way over-tired—"

Poor John Justin Adams, I thought. I could see all too well the jam he'd been in. At first forgetting Morbius completely; then remembering, and thinking what she would think of him for having forgotten; then not wanting to scare her but knowing he'd got to say something—

I said, "Your Father's fine, Altaira. He's in bed and asleep. And he'd better stay asleep for twelve hours at least. I gave him a shot; it seemed to me he'd been over-working, not getting enough rest—"

She said, "Oh, I'm *so* glad! I know he hasn't been sleeping enough . . . I've tried and tried to tell him." She came closer to me and laid a hand on my arm. She said, "Might I just go in and look at him. I won't wake him—"

I said, "Of course you can, honey." I felt old and avuncular.

She gave me another smile, and carefully didn't look at John Justin Adams, and was gone . . .

John Justin grabbed me by the arm with fingers that felt as if they might leave permanent dents. He said, "I had to do it that way about Morb—about her father, Doc!"

I said, "Of course you did." I smiled at him because I'd only just realized how young he really was.

But perhaps I shouldn't have smiled. He didn't seem to like it. He said, "What the hell d'you mean—of course?" and I couldn't help smiling again.

He scowled at me—then suddenly changed the scowl to a sheepish grin. He said, "My God, is it that obvious?"

I said, "We-ell, I'm sort of a trained observer of homo miscalled sapiens."

He caught at my arm again. He wasn't grinning now, sheepishly or otherwise. He said, "Look, Doc—I don't know what you're thinking. But in case it's wrong, I'd better put it right. And quick!" The fingers were sinking deeper and deeper into my flesh. He said, "You don't know me very well, but maybe you can guess I'm not—well, I'm no Jerry Farman about women. I—well, I've always had it in the back of

my mind that if I ever found the right one I just might transfer out of this Deep Space stuff. I mean, so that we could marry, and have a family, and be together the way human beings were meant to—"

He stopped as abruptly as he'd begun. He was bitterly embarrassed, not by me so much as by himself.

And then, before I could think of anything to say, he let go of my arm and pulled the back of a hand across his forehead and said, in a hushed voice that was almost a whisper, "Jesus, Doc—that tiger! If I'd been a split microsecond later with that blaster—" He closed his eyes for an instant, trying to shut out a sight behind them.

And then he said, "Now why the hell would he want to kill Altaira?"

Without thinking I said, "John, where's your memory? Didn't I tell you the story of the Unicorn?"

A slow flush crept up into his face, and I could have happily cut out my tongue. The trouble was that I'd suddenly realized how much I liked this boy, and the discovery had startled me into being utterly tactless.

The flush died away. "I see what you mean," he said, and his face had its poker mask on again.

He walked across to the center window and stood looking out of it for a moment. There was something about the set of his shoulder; the boy had disappeared, and this was Commander Adams again. Commander Adams once more wrestling with the problems of duty . . .

III

It was nearly dusk when we drove away, Adams at the wheel.

As we started around the curve into the grove of trees, I turned in my seat and saw Altaira still standing on the patio, staring after us.

I told Adams, and he nodded. His face was set, and I thought he looked ten years older.

We were two-thirds up the long slope to the desert before either of us spoke again. And then he said, suddenly, "Quite a day, huh? How d'you feel, Doc?"

"Unreal," I said. "And God-awfully tired!" I wished he hadn't asked me; it made me feel worse.

There was another silence after that. It lasted until we were through the gap in the rocks. I was three-quarters asleep when he said, just as if we'd been talking all the time, "That roller-coaster trip? I suppose

we *did* take it? . . . Those umpty-million relays! That hell-hole in the looking glass! . . . We aren't having nightmares, are we?"

"I wish we were," I said.

I wanted to leave it at that, but he wouldn't let me. He said, "That god-damn power! What the hell is it, Doc?"

I said, "I don't know! I'm no scientist." But then a memory rang in my head. "Remember what he said down there? 'Cosmic power.' Do you think he meant it, by any chance?"

The tractor swerved as Adams looked at me, startled. "Christ!" he said, "I wonder—"

There was more silence then, but no more dozing for me. My mind had started working again. I found myself going over every minute of this extraordinary day—and coming up with one vast Why . . .

Why the huge instrument to do away with instrumentality? Why the device which measured intellects with one hand and boosted them with the other? Why the extermination, in what Morbius had called 'one single night,' of the whole race of Krell super-beings? Why Morbius' dread of being forced to report on his discoveries? Why the terra-type animals? And why, why, why hadn't their development included protective coloration?

I stopped the why-ing right there, because the last was one which, conceivably, I could do something about answering. And any answer in this maze of riddles was better than none, might even give the key to others. Half an hour's work in my surgery—an hour's—and I might come up with something. I could only try. I made up my mind to start the minute I was back on board, or at least as soon as we'd had food . . .

I looked around. Adams was driving pretty fast, even though it was quite dark now. But we'd passed the chasm, so there was nothing to worry about. I began thinking about Farman and the others. I wondered whether there'd been any more mysterious happenings, and then realized that if there had, Jerry would have got in touch with Adams on the audi-video.

The lights of the ship were showing more and more plainly now. They'd been augmented by a flare which I figured must be just by Quinn's rig. And that started me thinking about Quinn, and how it really should have been he to whom Morbius showed the Krell powerhouse . . .

Adams said out of the blue, "Lonnie's got to see that underground stuff," and I laughed and said something about one of us being a telepath.

The moons were coming up. Their green-grey glow was changing the ship's lights to a glaring, brazen yellow which didn't fit the Altairian landscape. It was odd. It made me feel, suddenly and for the first time, that after all we were the interlopers.

"The fence is up," Adams said, and I peered ahead and saw the metal posts, at regular forty-foot intervals, standing all around the perimeter like inanimate sentries.

They looked innocuous, even faintly silly. But when we passed the twenty-yard mark, they burst into crackling life. Between them, great twenty-foot jets of blue-white shot out to join each other, looking like flaring wires. First they were only in that section immediately in our path, but almost at once, as the other posts picked up the impulse, they spread until they outlined the whole perimeter. Inside, the guards came running, converging on the point where the fence first was activated. I could hear the Bosun's voice shouting orders—and the beam of a searchlight from the ship cut a big ribbon out of the darkness, swept in narrowing arcs, and then hit us, pinning the tractor in a flood of brightness.

Adams said, "Good!" and nodded to himself.

More orders from inside, and within seconds the fence was dead—just a series of metal posts again. The searchlight was switched off too, and Adams drove slowly through and parked close to the side of the ship.

Farman came up as we climbed out. He shouted, "Fence on!" into the darkness, and I heard the click-clock of a big switch. He looked at Adams and said, "Hi, Skipper," and then was formal with, "Fence established. Nothing to report."

Adams said, "Fine. How's Lonnie getting along with that modulator?"

Farman said, "Been shut up in his shop all day. You get anything out of Morbius?"

Adams didn't answer; he started for the gangway, and Jerry and I tagged along . . .

It was the Cook's off-watch and we had a cold meal served by one of the orderlies. Adams and I were both ravenous, but in between mouthfuls we told Farman and Lonnie Quinn about everything we'd seen. Quinn hadn't wanted to leave his work, and it had taken a personal visit to the workshop to get him up to mess. But now he was glad he'd come. In fact, he was fascinated, and fired questions at us as fast as a Colt-Vickers disintegrator. His face had smears of grease all over it, and his hair was standing on end, and his eyes were sparking behind their huge glasses.

A lot of the questions were beyond us, but we did our best. And we questioned him too. About the power source and that hellish set of flame seventy miles under the ground.

When we'd described it—with me doing most of the talking and Adams putting in the key word once in a while—I came to the use of the word 'cosmic' by Morbius, and how we didn't know whether it was just a figure of speech or whether he'd meant it literally.

I thought Lonnie was going to jump right out of his chair. He was speechless for a moment, but then started another rapid-fire burst of questioning; so rapid-fire that we couldn't catch more than one word in three.

Adams cut in on him. He said, "Hold it, Lonnie—hold it! First chance we get, you can see for yourself."

And that was the end of the meal. Quinn shot back to his workshop, down in the bowels of the ship. Farman went to his bunk to catch a few hours sleep before his night watch. Adams, taking over, started making rounds with the Bosun—and I went to the surgery.

I locked myself in, and put on an overall. I set up my operating-table, and got the lights fixed right, and then went to my spare vacuum-locker, and opened it and took out the body of the titi . . .

IV

It must have been about half an hour later, while I was staring white-faced and groggy at the opened-up subject on my table, that the EM fence began to act up. As Adams told it to me afterwards, he was standing between the gangway and the rig, talking to the Bosun, when it happened. The section of fence right behind the rig began to spark violently, sending out its joining sets of electric fire. This meant—or should have meant—that something or someone was approaching from outside the perimeter.

But the shadowless sand, almost black in the moonlight, was visible for miles. And there was nothing on it. Nothing moving or still.

"What the hell—?" said Adams, and the Bosun shouted for a hand called Nevski, who was Quinn's most trusted helper and in charge of the fence.

Nevski came running—and all the time the fence went on sparking. Only it was sparking differently now, with the bolts of flame no longer joining each other but growing shorter and shorter.

And the rest of the fence, which should have gone into sympathetic

operation, was completely dead.

Adams didn't like it. Nor did the Bosun, who began to shout for extra men but countermanded the orders when Nevski, a phlegmatic soul, merely rubbed at his chin and said, "That ****ing continuer must be shorting again," and marched off toward the fence-control gear on the other side of the rig.

Adams and the Bosun followed him—perhaps, as we figured later, saving their lives in the process.

They watched while he grumbled his way down into the machine-pit and started tinkering. After a few minutes, Adams asked him whether he thought Mr. Quinn should be sent for, but Nevski, with all that sturdy independence so typical of Devisor hands, merely spat in the sand and asked, "What the * * * * can he do that I can't do?"

It was then that the young Cadet-hand Grey came running up to Adams. He was panting, and almost dropped his D-R rifle as he saluted. He said, "Reporting off post, Sir—" and then shed all military formula. "I heard it again, Sir!" he said. "The breathing! It went right by me! But there's nothing there! There's nothing there!" His voice was going too quickly up the scale.

Adams barked, "Where? Where's your post? Quick, man."

But the boy didn't have to reply. Because, right on top of his words, the scream came . . .

It came from the direction of the ship, and everyone outside the ship—sentries, mechanics, Adams and the Bosun—all heard it.

It was the dreadful scream of a man in terror and agony. It hung on the still air for one intolerable moment—and then died. After it, the silence seemed thicker than it had before.

It was Lonnie Quinn who had screamed, and it was Adams who found what was left of him . . .

I saw it only a few minutes later, after Grey had come pounding at the surgery door.

The boy was in such a state that he could barely articulate, and it was with only the knowledge that Quinn was dead that I rushed out of the ship and around toward the little open port of his workshop. Over my head, the communicator's emergency siren howled, followed by a voice shouting orders. And the searchlight came on at full power and began to sway its beam around the desert.

There was no one with the remnants of Alonzo Quinn when I reached them, and hardened surgeon though I was, I had trouble resisting an almost irresistible urge to vomit.

He had been, literally, torn to pieces. Worse, he had first been

dragged bodily out through the port—whose aperture was too small by many inches to force his body through except by the exertion of some almost unthinkable power. There were dreadful evidences on the rim of the port—and the rest, far worse, was strewn about the sand. Not a limb had been left on the trunk, and even that had been ripped asunder . . . And the head—well, it lay face downwards, thank God!

In my mind I kept hearing Morbius' voice—". . . Like rag dolls—ripped to pieces by a malignant child . . ."

V

It was after midnight when Adams called me and Farman into the mess room for a conference. A full strength guard was still surrounding the ship, and the fence, so far as any of the Divisors could tell, was working again.

The searchlight was tireless, but it had revealed nothing and no one. Except—

Another trail of the great amorphous footprints. They first appeared immediately outside the fence, just where Adams and the Bosun had been standing when the so-called shorting had taken place. And they led straight to the ship and around it to the port of Quinn's workshop.

And there they stopped. Whatever made them must have passed within six feet of Adams, made direct way between two constantly patroling sentries, and crossed the full vision-field of the gunner stationed at the rear blaster.

But it hadn't been seen; and the footprints had come out of nowhere, dissolved into nowhere . . .

And now the three surviving officers of United Planets Cruiser C-57-D were looking at each other over the bare mess-table.

Adams said, "I've made up my mind. We're getting out. It's clear my duty's to take Morbius back. Come daylight we start the job of putting that core back in the ship. With Lonnie gone, it's going to take—" he pondered—"maybe twelve hours. But we might be attacked again while we're on the job." He looked from me to Farman. "Any ideas?"

There was an urgent knocking on the door, and the Bosun marched in. He was obviously the bearer of more bad news, but he was very military, very correct.

He snapped a salute at Adams and said, "Report man missing, sir. Zero two four eight six three—Specialist First Class Dirocco, James."

Adams jumped up—and sat down again. He said, "That's the Cook,"

and the Bosun said, "Yessir. He's gone, sir."

Adams shot questions at him, but didn't find out much. The whole story was that when, only a few moments ago, the Bosun had been around the perimeter, checking each man at his post, he'd discovered that Cookie was missing. He'd made a full search, including the ship, and there was no doubt about it. There had been conflicting stories from the other men as to when he was last seen—but the fact remained he had disappeared.

"The crew was wonderin', sir," the Bosun said, "whether we'd be puttin' out a search party—"

He got no farther. Adams said, "No!" slamming his first down on the table.

"Yessir. Right, sir." The Bosun snapped another salute—and was gone.

And again the remaining officers of Cruiser C-57-D looked at each other across the table.

Adams said heavily, "That's two . . ."

Farman said, "Looks like Morbius wasn't fooling about that Force."

I said, "One thing we know now—it's nothing to do with him. That shot I gave him knocked him out."

Adams said, "What is it then? Some—some left-over Krell?"

There was a silence—which I broke. I said, "There are too many things we don't understand. If we got the answer to even one of 'em, the rest might fall into place . . ."

They stared at me, puzzled. As well they might be; I wasn't any too sure myself why I was talking this way. But I went on with it. I said, "Take that monkey—the titi," and told how I'd taken its body out of the tractor and kept it to dissect.

I said, "I was just generally curious about the animals. I'd no idea what I was going to find. Or *not* going to find—"

The way they looked at me made me realize I must be showing something of what I'd felt down there in the surgery.

Adams said, "For Christsake, what are you talking about?"

I said, "I'm not sure I know. But—well, that monkey wasn't possible. It shouldn't have been living. In my book, it wasn't ever living. And yet we saw it alive. In fact, we killed it and heard it die!"

Farman said, "Jesus—what're you trying to do? Can't you talk English?" He was almost shouting; I suppose our nerves were stretched too tight.

I said, "All right. In plain words for the layman, the titi didn't have

the works for living. Inside, it was a biologist's nightmare. A heart and only two main arteries. No stomach. No intestines, just a single duct. No veinous network. A chest cavity, but no lungs in it." I found I was thumping the table. "And no glandular system. Get that, will you? No glands! . . . And everything padded, filled up, with a mass of cross-weaved fibrous tissue no more use than a stuffing of cotton!"

I don't know how much of my own horror I'd gotten over to them, but at least they were listening. And even thinking. Because Farman said, "What about the brain?"

"I don't know. I hadn't started on the head." I thought about it. "I'm not sure I want to," I said.

There was a long silence, until Adams said, "Okay, Doc—so it's a mystery. And you may be right about the answer helping with everything else. But we don't have an answer. So right now I'm on another problem. Morbius. He's either got something to do with our troubles, drug or no drug, or he hasn't. And if he hasn't, he might be in trouble himself. Maybe that immunity he talked about isn't holding." He was carefully saying nothing about Altaira, but I knew he must be thinking about her. He said, "Either way, he ought to be under guard. To protect him, or us. Because as soon as this ship's ready, she's taking off. With him on board."

Farman said, "The ship wants a guard too, Skipper. And all hands to work on getting the core back in."

Adams nodded. "That's the trouble, Jerry. How to spare the men. One man even."

I said, "Why not me? You'd be without a doctor—but my Dresser's as good as most of us with degrees."

Adams looked at me quickly. He almost smiled. "That's an idea, Doc! Quite an idea!"

VI

In less than half an hour, I was in the tractor and on my way, with one of the older Cadet-hands driving me. I had Adams' belt on, with the audi-video attachment. So I could keep in touch, Adams had said.

It was certainly a consolatory thought. But still, now I was actually en route, with all bridges burned behind me, I wasn't so pleased with myself as I had been when I'd volunteered.

The desert looked blacker than ever now the moons were high. And my driver gave me a bad ten minutes along the edge of the chasm. He

was a taciturn lad named Randall, and he seemed unmoved by this trip through country he'd never seen before; country which might very well house the terrifying, apparently invisible enemy which had already torn one man to bloody shreds and spirited away another.

I tried to talk to him, but without much success. He was called Gabby by his shipmates—and I understood why. I can't say that his apparent nonchalance made me feel any better; I had more than a suspicion it might be assumed, to cover much the same sort of qualms I was having myself.

We went through the rocks and down into the valley, and Gabby was moved to words for once. He looked at the scene, placid in the green moonlight, and said, "Sorta nice," and after that effort relapsed into a silence which lasted until we drew up by the patio.

There was no light behind any of the windows; no sign of life. And no sound from anywhere.

I told him to wait a minute and climbed down and crossed the patio to the door. As I reached it, I thought I saw something move in the bushes which lined the track. I repressed a violent start, and looked carefully, and came to the conclusion that my eyes—and nerves—had been fooling me.

I tried the door, and found that it opened. I didn't want to make any noise and perhaps frighten Altaira, so I went back to the tractor again and spoke softly to Gabby. I said, "Everything's all right. You can go back. Thanks."

He nodded. He took his D-R pistol from his holster and laid it on the seat beside him, and then reached out and tested the spring catch of the manually operated Colt-Vickers slung against the seat. He looked at the house-front with an appraising eye.

"Look pretty with lights on," he said.

He sketched a gesture—half-wave, half-salute—and drove off . . .

I stood and watched while the dark bulk of the tractor disappeared into the grove. I didn't envy the boy the lonely drive back. I felt, all of a sudden, inordinately lonely myself.

I turned to go back to the house—and found I was staring at the black windows and wondering whether, when I went in, I might find the household had been visited by the horror which had visited the ship . . .

I put my hand down to my belt—to Adams' belt—and felt for the audi-video switch and lead. But I checked myself. Adams had enough troubles without my getting in touch with him every five minutes just because my feet were cold. Especially before I'd even found out

Altaira was all right . . .

I went quickly to the door and opened it and stepped into the house. I closed the door behind me—and was in pitch darkness.

Groping in my blouse pocket for a flashlight, I took a step forward—

And crashed painfully into something huge and hard and immovable, I staggered back, my head singing and my heart in my mouth. I pressed the switch of the flashlight—and saw the dead hulk of the Robot standing there in the center of the entryway . . .

I swallowed a couple of times. My mouth was so dry my tongue felt swollen and unmanageable. But I got it working at last and said, "Robby—"

The single glow came on behind the louvres of his headpiece. It was like suddenly seeing a friend when you're lost in a forest . . .

I got him to switch on lights. I walked into the living room and he followed me and I asked how Morbius was, and Altaira.

He winked and blinked at me, crackled and whirred. He said, "Doctor Morbius was asleep. Miss Altaira was asleep."

The past tense had a strange sound, but I realized it had to be used after periods of deactivation. I said, "Go and see how they are now," and he turned and strode lumberingly to the rear door.

I was still in the middle of the room, dumping my musette bag on a chair, when he opened the door—and I heard from the passageway beyond a muffled shouting in Morbius' voice . . .

I was across the room in two jumps, remembering enough to shout at Robby to get out of my way. As he turned to stand flat against the wall and I ran past him, I could see the door of Morbius' room standing open.

I got there in three strides, but not before I'd heard Altaira's voice. I didn't catch the words, but the tone was low and—rather desperately—soothing. Then Morbius shouted incoherencies again—and when I reached the door I saw him struggling with Altaira.

He saw me, and turned away from her and came at me with his arms flailing. He was shouting something which sounded like, "Don't want to sleep—don't want to sleep—" His movements were spasmodic and badly coordinated, and his eyes showed he was still under the influence of the drug; so much under the influence it was amazing he could be on his feet at all.

Altaira gasped when she saw me, staring as if she thought I must be an illusion. But I didn't have time to speak to her. I was too busy with her father. I sidestepped his rush and grabbed his wrists with one of those holds you learn as an interne and never forget.

He struggled wildly. But, drugged as he was, there wasn't much force in him and I got him back to the bed quite easily and sat him on the edge of it.

His eyes closed and his head dropped, but when I eased him back onto the pillows and started to lift his feet, a sort of convulsive tremor shook him and he was up again, fighting me and shouting a babble of words in which I could only hear, don't and sleep.

Altaira came to help me. She was trembling, and there were tear stains on her face. But she was cool enough and did exactly as I told her, and before long we had him half-sitting, half-lying, across the bed.

His head was resting against the wall, and although he was motionless his eyes were open. It was odd; when he wasn't actually lying down he seemed quieter. Maybe it was because somehow—by some almost superhuman determination—he could keep himself this way from relapsing into sleep.

I stood up, slowly and carefully. He didn't move. I said to Altaira, very quietly, "Stay where you are. I won't be a minute . . ."

Her blue eyes looked at me in agonized appeal, and I smiled at her reassuringly. I went out into the passage and found Robby where I'd left him and sent him for my musette bag.

I went back and leaned against the jamb of Morbius' door, where Altaira could see me. Her father hadn't moved; but his eyes were still open.

Robby came back and I took the bag from him and found my emergency kit and loaded a small syringe with a full c.c. of Hesperidol.

I palmed the syringe and walked back into the door, watching Morbius' eyes as I crossed to him. There was a slight contraction of the pupils, but nothing more. I sat down beside him again, and he muttered something more about don't and sleep. I reached for his wrist, and when he let me raise it, and pull back his sleeve, I knew I was all right. As the needle pricked him, he winced, and his eyes rolled toward me. But he didn't move. I don't think he could; the fight he'd put up against the soporific had taken everything out of him except that weird determination to stay awake.

I pulled the needle out, carefully. I said, "Don't worry, you won't go to sleep again," and watched his face.

In a few more seconds it relaxed. In a few more he was smiling the happy, Buddha-like smile Hesperidol always seems to produce. I motioned Altaira to the door, and she went out slowly, looking back at her father all the time. I propped him up on pillows, and left him still

smiling, his eyes wide.

I joined Altaira in the passage. She was wearing a long, robelike sort of thing, and her hair was loose over her shoulders. She looked like a beautiful but very frightened child, and I put a hand on her arm and squeezed it reassuringly, and told her that what I'd given her father was one of the latest hypnotics. I said, “He'll be the way you saw him for several hours. Perfectly happy, and *not* asleep.”

She smiled at me. But her lips were quivering and she couldn't talk. I squeezed her arm again and led her along to the living room, telling Robby to stay outside Morbius' door and tell us if he tried to get up.

I shut the living room door and settled her in a big chair and found a decanter of wine in the dining alcove and poured a glass and made her sip it and got one for myself.

I pulled up another chair and sat to face her—and got her to tell me what had been happening. She was so thankful for my being there that it hadn't occurred to her yet to ask why I was here.

She said, “He—he was asleep for a long time. For hours. Until just before you came. I was going to bed—then I heard him start shouting. I couldn't understand what he was trying to say. I ran into his room—and—and—” Her voice faltered but she made herself go on.

“I—I was afraid,” she said. “He didn't know who I was. He kept shouting—he was frightened about sleeping, because of terrible dreams he was having. He hated you—he kept saying your name, over and over. And—and John's name—” a slow tide of color swept up from her neck—“and he didn't know who I was!” she repeated. “He didn't know who I was! He—he tried to hit me—”

She stopped. I thought there was going to be an outburst of tears, but she fought them back and I liked her even more. She raised her glass and took a sip of her wine.

And looked at me. I saw the question I was fearing come into her eyes. It was mixed with her fear.

She said, “But—but you didn't know . . . Why did you come? Has anything—has anything happened to John?”

I said, “It's all right, Altaira. Nothing's happened to him. He's fine. I've come here to look after you and your father.”

She said, “But why now? Why like this, in the middle of the night? Something must have happened!”

So I had to tell her. I gave no detail except that there'd been an attack on the ship, and that one man had been killed. I said we hadn't seen the attackers and didn't know who or what they were but had figured that, since there was some mysterious enemy about, and since

her father was ill, somebody should be at the house. Adams had wanted to come, I said, but had had to stay with his command.

She listened to me gravely. She sat there with her eyes on mine. They weren't only beautiful eyes, I found, but highly intelligent eyes.

She didn't say anything at all when I'd finished. She seemed to be considering everything I'd said. She also seemed to be nothing like a child any longer, but a mature and thoughtful woman.

For some reason, I didn't like the silence. So I asked a question which had been constantly recurring in my mind. I said, "Altaira—has your father ever mentioned any possible danger to you. From—from —" I couldn't find any words and broke off.

She said, "He's told me about the bad things that happened when all the other people were killed. The people who came from Earth, with him and with my mother. He says that was why he and Robby made the shutters outside. He says there was Something that—that hated anyone who wanted to go away and tell about this planet." She stopped for a moment. "But he says It didn't hate him, or Mother. Because they didn't want to go away . . ."

I was fascinated: Morbius—whom I'd never suspected of lying, however much circumstances made him seem to be—had told the same story to his child as he had to us.

Altaira suddenly sat bolt upright in her chair, a hand to her mouth and horror darkening her eyes.

She said, "Oh! Do you think—Do you suppose—Could it be my fault? Because—because I don't want to be here any more? Because I want to go away with John?"

I said quickly, "Of course not. If it was your fault, you'd be the one that would be—would be in trouble. Can't you see that, child?" I wondered whether I was speaking the truth or not. I thought I probably was.

Anyway, it worked. The horrified look left her face, and she said suddenly, "I think you're good. I—I like you. You feel the same as my father—but not really the same at all . . ."

I didn't say anything. But I smiled at her. I felt, maybe foolishly, extraordinarily proud.

Then she said, on an entirely different note, "You—you are a friend of John's, aren't you?" and when I'd nodded decisively, "So you understand? About—about what has happened to us? To John and to me? . . ."

I said, "Yes, Altaira, I understand."

She said, "It's so—so strange. I don't belong to myself any more. Or

to Father. I don't understand it. It's beautiful, but it hurts too. And it's rather frightening . . ."

Something of the child was back in her face as she looked at me, the blue eyes unwavering.

"Do all people know that feeling?" she said. "Do you know it?"

I said, "The happy people do, Altaira. I do. I know it a little too well, perhaps." I had a fleeting feeling of amazement that I should be talking about Caroline to this child. I said, "But my reason for feeling that way—well, she isn't alive any more."

I don't think I drenched the statement with pathos; I think I made it the flat statement of fact that it was. But the blue eyes were suddenly soft with pity, and she leant forward and laid a hand for a moment over my hand where it rested on the arm of my chair.

She said, "I'm so sorry . . . So sorry . . ."

I sat studying her, not saying anything. I wondered whether John Justin Adams deserved her—and came to the conclusion that he did. I said, "Repaying you, let me state that I like you. Very much. Very much indeed."

I smiled at her; I'd just thought of something which should have occurred to me long before.

I put my hand down to Adams' belt, and felt for the switch of the audi-video and flipped it on and pulled out the projector on its shining long lead.

I said, "How would you like to talk to John? And maybe see him too?"

She didn't speak, but she didn't have to. One glance at her was enough.

I put the projector to my mouth and said, "Ostrow calling Commander," and almost at once Adams' voice acknowledged. I said, "Reporting all sound and secure, Skipper. How's things with you?"

"Nothing new, Doc. Tractor's back okay." His voice was thin and faraway and metallic, but absolutely clear.

I said, "Morbius was fighting the drug. But I gave him Hesperidol and he's all right. So's everything else—and everyone." I paused for a moment. "You by yourself?"

I think he was ahead of me. He said, "Yes," and left it to me.

I said, "Wait a minute—" and opened the finder and held it so that it would show Altaira for a moment. I unbuckled the belt and slipped it around her and pushed her back into her chair and gave her the projector to hold and showed her how to use it.

“I’m going to take a look at the patient,” I said, and as I went out heard the fault metallic ghost of Adams’ voice. Closing the door behind me, I made for Morbius’ room. Outside it, Robby was standing motionless but with the single gleam that showed he was alive.

Morbius was still sitting as I’d left him. His eyes moved as he saw me, and he smiled contentedly. I went in and spoke to him. I said, “Are you all right, Doctor Morbius?” and he nodded, more like a bearded Buddha than ever. He could have spoken, I knew, but just didn’t see the need.

Out in the passage again, I looked at my watch, and calculated it would be long after dawn before he’d come out of the euphoria. I started back toward the living room—and was only a little way along the passage when I was stopped dead by an idea . . .

It was one of those thoughts that come complete, and as fast and illuminating as a flash of lightning. It scared me, but it was so exciting and so obviously right that I knew I could beat the intimidation . . .

I looked at my watch again. I had at least four hours, and that was more than enough. All I had to do was to get Altaira to bed and out of the way. Then I could go ahead, provided—

I decided to let the proviso look after itself for the time being, and went on to the living room. Altaira had finished her talk with Adams. The belt hung over the arm of her chair, and she was sitting back looking into nothing and contemplating the mysterious future.

I didn’t have any trouble with her. She was so lost in the contemplation that when I said her father would be perfectly all right for the next five or six hours, and that she should go to bed, she agreed without any fuss at all. She smiled at me and said goodnight, and went calmly out; as calmly as if she were a schoolgirl and I was Uncle Francis on a week-end visit. Her mind was so full of all the new wonders that her reactions to me were purely automatic—and I didn’t wonder. Poor child. Nineteen years of peaceful development, and then this sudden bewildering burst of experience!

When she’d gone, I waited for ten minutes by my watch. I was so anxious to get going that it seemed a long time. But it was over at last, and I started for the far end of the room and Morbius’ study.

And then stopped half-way, and went quickly back to the dining alcove and found the wall-switch Morbius had used to show us the armored shutters.

I pressed it—and in one silent flash the windows were darkened, cutting out the pale green moonlight.

Pleased with myself for the precaution, I promptly forgot it and went back across the room again. I was almost running when I started,

but going much slower when I reached the study door. I was afraid, and with a double-edged sort of fear. I was afraid the one proviso might stop me doing what I was planning; and I was afraid of the plan itself.

I slid back the door and lights came on as it opened fully. I took a deep breath, and walked in and around to the ell.

The proviso wasn't against me. The Krell door was standing open, as Morbius had left it when he led us out . . .

I filled my lungs again. I seemed to be having trouble breathing, and my heart was pounding uncomfortably.

I went through the strange-shaped arch, ducking my head a little, and walked down the rock corridor. My footsteps rang with a soft, hollow echoing.

I came out of the corridor and into the great oval of the laboratory. I stopped—and the silence as the sound of my footsteps died away was like a blow; it was as if I'd hit some padded, invisible barrier.

I crossed slowly to the railed-off island in the center.

I sat where Morbius had sat, and reached out for the head-set of what the Krells had called the Gateway.

I put the thing on my head, adjusting the pliable arms until the electrodes were as Morbius had fitted them, one on each temple, the third on the cranium.

I tried to make myself calm, but my heart still pounded too hard. In my mind I went over everything Morbius had said, and wished it had been more.

I leaned over and pressed the first switch inside the rail and looked up at the panel and saw the pathetic little glow of my registration.

The white switch was just by my hand. I only had to move my fingers an inch or so to the right.

For one irrelevant instant, I thought of John Adams and wondered what he would think if he could see me, and what he was doing now —

SEVEN

Commander J. J. Adams

That was a hell of a night. There was nothing I could do. There was nothing anybody could do. Except keep a tight guard and wait.

I didn't dare start work on the core till daylight in case of another attack. So I wandered in and out of the ship, making sure everybody was on their toes.

They were. Who wouldn't have been after seeing what happened to Lonnie? And wondering whether it had been worse for Dirocco?

And I kept thinking about Doc. I couldn't help it, because every time I thought about Altaira I naturally had to think about him too. A wonderful guy. It took guts to go out there alone. Especially after scraping poor Lonnie off the sand and knowing what got him might get you too.

I was keeping myself busy collecting all Lonnie's personal kit when the man on radar beeped me. I ran up to Control and found him scratching his head. He'd had nothing on the first attack, but now he'd had a flicker he couldn't make out. It wasn't right for any of the standard readings, but he said it had been definite.

I watched his viewer with him, but we got nothing. He showed me the sector where he'd seen the flicker. It was the same as the one the attack had come from.

So I went out and grabbed the Bosun. We were walking over to that section, when another one sparked, way off to the right.

This one worked. All the other panels reacted and the whole thing came alive. The searchlight swung around, following me to the contact point while the Bosun brought up a concentration of fire-power behind me.

I could hear something moving out there, scuffling in the sand. And breathing. Not like that other breathing. Lighter, smaller.

The searchlight weaved about. But it didn't pick up whatever was making the sound. I could hear it all the time though. There was a big patch of shadow out there from a dune. It might be in that, I figured. Or it might not be see-able. Like the first thing.

I had the gun out of my holster. I was just going to try a blast or two at the shadow-patch when the searchlight pinned something. A sort of dark hulk in the sand. As if whatever-it-was was burrowing up and out.

The Bosun gave out with a “Ready!” to the gunners. But the thing moved again and I saw what it was. I hollered a “Hold fire!” and it stood up and came weaving towards the fence.

It looked like a man covered with sand.

It was. It was the Cook, Dirocco.

He seemed in bad shape. He was went double, holding an arm over his face as he staggered on. Somebody switched off the fence and I ran out to him. He fell on my feet and lay there. He was groaning. The Bosun ran up and we knelt down and turned him over.

The reek hit us as he let out a gasp. The Bosun said, “What the ****!” and I said, “Whisky, for Christsake!”

II

They brought him up to me in Control around an hour later. It was beginning to get light outside. The Bosun had him under Class One Arrest. If I hadn’t been so damn mystified, I’d’ve laughed. Cookie, the ship’s character, with a godawful hangover and not a wisecrack in a carload.

They’d scrubbed him and put him in clean overalls. Doc’s man had pumped him out. He was a sorry little man. He stood so stiff at attention he was shaking.

I said to the Bosun, “Did you check the hands’ liquor ration?” And he said, “Yessir. All correct. And there’s no whisky in it anyway, sir.”

I looked at Cookie. “Where d’you get it?” I said. “And how the hell did you get through the fence?”

He was so low he was nearly crying. I told him to pull himself together and he did his best.

He started with something that brought me out of my chair. He said, “It was that Robby that started it, sir—the Robot—”

When I’d calmed down he went on and told the damndest yarn. So unbelievable it had to be true. He reminded me he’d been talking to Robby yesterday and I’d called him for leaving post. He said what he’d been talking about was liquor. He’d got the idea over the grapevine the Robot could manufacture anything synthetically. So he’d slipped it the last two inches of a private stock of rye, and told it to whip up ten

gallons and deliver it some time today. Without anybody knowing. He'd even picked a place for the cache; behind the rocks Doc and I had walked out to a couple of times.

That was the gist of it. Because Robby had delivered, *and* without anyone knowing. And Cookie had slipped out through the fence when it was switched off to let me and Doc through with the tractor.

I stared at the character. I still might have laughed, but now I wasn't just mystified. I was mad. When I thought of what had been going on while this sot was drinking himself to a stupor three hundreds yards away, I could've choked him.

But I didn't. I just threw the book at him. And told the Bosun to take him away. And to keep on his tail. Forever.

I took another walk around outside. And talked to Jerry for a minute. And then came back and went on with the job of getting Lonnie's stuff together.

When it was in my safe, I sent for the Bosun and fixed for a funeral at zero seven hundred. That'd give him time to have a fatigue party dig a grave after daylight.

I felt bad about Lonnie. The worst thing seemed to be that he hadn't even seen that underground set-up of the Krells. I worried about that. I suddenly wanted to talk to Doc about it—and to Altaira. But then I remembered she didn't know Lonnie, hadn't ever set eyes on him . . .

III

At zero seven hundred we had the funeral. The Emergency Active Service Abbreviated version. I felt sick at my stomach as I read the stuff. Which was funny. I'd thought the words were pretty good before.

Farman and the Bosun lowered the sack into the grave, and I gave the word for a two volley salute.

And that was over. Lonnie Quinn was over.

I had the Bosun and two men fill in the sand and put up the marker while Jerry got the rest lined up in front of the gangway. So I could talk to them.

I climbed up and looked them over. They were all right. They had that rough-edged look about them good spacehogs get when they're in trouble and ready to fight out of it.

I gave it to them pretty straight. I told them enough of what was going on and how our job was to get the remains of the *Bellerophon*

party back home. But, I said, we couldn't start till the auxiliary core was back in the ship. And that was going to be a long chore. Especially without Mr. Quinn. However, the sooner we got it done, the sooner we could lift off.

I said, "We're all plenty mad about Mr. Quinn. But this is no time to stick around being heroes fighting something we can't see . . ."

I said, "And if anyone wants to say we're running—well, they're right!"

It got the laugh I wanted—and I put 'em to work . . .

IV

It was around eleven hundred before I got a chance to buzz Doc with no one else around. I didn't use the big screen in Control because of the radar man. I used the little set in my cabin.

I had a bad five minutes. That was how long it took me to raise an acknowledgment from him. And five minutes is a long time.

But I got him. He said, "Ostrow accepting call," but didn't open his view projector.

I said, "What's wrong?" and he said, "Nothing."

So I told him how long it had taken to get him. I said, "Open that viewer."

He opened it, but it took him too long.

What I got was a close-up. Or he'd meant it to be. But he wasn't used to handling the gear and gave me more than he wanted to. I could see he was in that goddamn lab. And I could see where he was sitting.

I said, "Everything okay here. How's your end?"

He said, "All right. Morbius isn't out of euphoria—and Altaira's still asleep. No excursion, no alarums." He sounded funny, sort of excited.

I let him have it. I said, "And what the hell are you doing in the lab?"

It shook him. He started to stammer something but I cut in on him. I said, "You're monkeying around with that brain booster. You idiot!"

He let his excitement come to the top. "Listen, John!" he said. "This is wonderful! One more little session and I'll have all the answers for you—"

I said, "Christ, man, you might kill yourself!"

He was in real close-up on my screen now and I saw he wasn't

looking too good. Older and sort of fine-drawn. But I couldn't be sure.

He said, "John, I'm all right! I'm being careful—a few minutes at a time's all I allow myself—"

He was going on, but I had to stop him. My communicator beeped and I knew I'd have to go. I told Doc so and said, "For Christ's sake, watch out for yourself! Buzz you later."

I switched off and went to the communicator and found I was wanted outside. Some question about the quick or slow way to hoist the core . . .

V

The men really worked. I'd figured we couldn't even get the core as far as the upper chamber before it was so dark we'd have to quit and go back to full guard again. But they actually had it inside the chamber before eighteen hundred. And after that the work could go on, dark outside or not.

I called a break for food. The first one. Up to now they'd just had coffee and A. S. rations dished out while they were working . . .

Farman arranged reliefs—half strength on guard, half eating. He stayed outside with the first guard himself.

It was eighteen thirty when the first shift started to eat. Outside it was nearly dark, with the moons not coming up yet.

It was eighteen thirty-five when the first alarm came. From radar. The Cadet who was on it jumped up and shouted, "Commander—Commander!"

I was over to him in a couple of jumps. He pointed to his viewer and I saw a whole lot of flickers. Faint nickers, not real readings. They seemed to be all around our perimeter, and a long way from it.

I said, "What's the distance?" and the kid said, "Couple of miles, sir. Maybe more." He was nervous. "But that's not a true reaction on the screen there. It—it—I don't know what it is . . ."

I told him to keep watching. I grabbed the communicator mike and roared "All out to posts! Possible attack!"

I pulled a manual Colt-Vickers from the rack, grabbed a spare audi-vid belt and ran out of the ship. It was dark as pitch. Until the searchlight flicked on and began to search. I waited till the Bosun reported, "All on post," and then grabbed him and told him to check the gunners in the ship and stay at gun control and switch on the audi-video there so I could use mine as a command mike. I wondered

if the boy on radar had had the sense to switch on his. I tried it and found he had. I said, “Still got the flickers?” and his voice came back clear, “Yessir. More of ‘em. All around. They’re closer. Say a mile.”

I cut him off and switched to gun-control. And got the Bosun right away; he’d made good time. I said, “This is a fire order. Traverse the whole perimeter—three blasts a second. Range one mile and down.”

He gave me a “Command understood” beep, and fifteen seconds later the two big blasters were spraying around the circle. They lit up the whole desert in a band of zig-zag flashes a hundred yards deep.

But the flashes showed nothing. Nor did the searchlight. I could hear the men muttering.

I buzzed radar again, and the boy said, “Still all around sir. Moving in.” I could hear him gulp. “Those blasts should’ve fixed ‘em. But they didn’t—”

I said, “What’s the distance now?” and he said, “Around half, sir—”

I cut him off and got the Bosun. I said, “Fire order. Come down to half range for three bursts. Then shift down a quarter and repeat.”

He beeped the caller in acknowledgment, and a couple of seconds later both guns started again.

This time they were on one orbit after another with no paused in between. The zig-zag flashes were a steady stream. They drowned out the searchlight and showed up the whole ring of desert. Every grain of the goddamn red sand.

There was still nothing to see.

Then radar buzzed me. The kid’s voice was getting higher all the time. He said, “Sir—sir—there’s only one flicker now. Real big. The other ones’ve gone! But this is big! And bright—”

I said, “How near? And where?”

“Close, sir. Not more than a hundred yards!” He gave me a bearing.

It was right on the fence-panel where the thing got through before.

I cut him off and yelled to Farman to draw the men back. Right up against the ship.

He had ‘em there in double time. The guns had stopped blasting and it was dark all over. Except where the searchlight cut into the black like a knife.

I was buzzing gun control when the fence reacted to something.

The same way it had when we’d thought the continuer had shorted. The jets were weak, not joining. And the other panels didn’t light up.

I heard the Bosun’s voice over my receiver. I said, “Both guns on that live section of fence.”

While I was speaking the live section died, and one of the post sagged, melting.

I roared at Jerry to open fire with everything he had. Same target.

I was standing half way up the gangplank. The searchlight was already on the panel of fence, lighting a patch about twenty yards square. And then the guns started. And the hand-blasters and the manual Colt-Vickers and all the D-R pistols. All converging fire on the same panel.

The whole target area lit up like the third floor of hell. If a bug had been there we'd have had to see it.

But we saw what I'd expected. Nothing.

Until one of the men, right beside the gangway, stopped firing.

It was young Grey. I don't know how I heard him over all that hell-racket, but I did.

"The footprints!" he yelled. "Look at the footprints!"

I saw them while he was still screaming. They were like the others. Only this time we were watching them being made. By something we couldn't see. The first one was just inside the fence. The sand puckered and then the hole came and the sand poured down into it.

The second footprint came—about twenty feet nearer.

Jerry Farman must have seen it. I heard him shout, and then I saw him. He was running like a bat out of hell, straight at the thing. Or at where it ought to be. He had one of the techs' nuclear welders in his hands, holding it like an old-style flame-thrower. It was jetting out a streak of blue flame twenty feet ahead of him. He must have figured that if blasters wouldn't touch the thing maybe a burst of what they used to call hydro-fire might do it.

I yelled at him, but he didn't stop. I took a running jump off the gangway and tried to start after him.

But I wasn't in time. About ten feet in front of the last footprint, he seemed to stop. It was the damndest thing. The welder fell out of his hands. His body bent back and his feet came off the ground. He went up. And up. He was kicking and throwing his arms around.

Then his body began to dodge and swing in the air. Twenty feet over our heads. He looked like a limp doll being shaken.

I remembered Morbius saying, "Like rag dolls . . ." and then something about a crazy child.

I guess it didn't last more than a second.

He was raised up higher, his head and his legs and his arms all jerking. And he was hurled—right at the side of the ship. Right above

the center of the line of men there.

He—he smashed against it. I could feel the impact make a tremor in the gangplank under my feet.

What was left of his body thudded down on the sand like a half-empty sack.

The men scattered. There was only one thing to do. I yelled at them to get back in the ship. The firing had died down and most of them heard me. Those that didn't saw me waving them up the gangway.

They began to run for it. I went forward to try and cover them. I still hung onto the Colt-Vickers. I even fired a burst, though what good it would be I didn't know.

All the men made it except a couple of stragglers racing up. They must have panicked and gone too far when Jerry Farman's body hit the ship. One of them was Grey. He shot past me, and almost had a foot on the gangway when it happened.

Another of the footprints came, closer to the ship. Between me and the ship. Grey screamed and fell, face in the sand. And a huge invisible weight slammed down on his back. Then the boy's body was pushed—stamped—down into the sand. The sand covered him. Except for one leg sticking up like a dead branch.

The other straggler got to the gangway. He was halfway up it when he was caught.

And then he screamed. It was a worse sound than Grey's. He was lifted up. Higher than Farman had been. He dangled in the air.

I'll never get it out of my mind. Never. Twenty, thirty feet up in the air, he was—he was pulled apart . . .

Then he was thrown away. Dropped.

Rag dolls . . .

They were shouting at me from the ship. The Bosun came out at the top of the gangway and started firing.

I found myself backing up. Until I was against the side of the ship. There was nothing else to do. Except run. And where would that have got me?

There was another footprint. And another. The thing was backing away from the gangway. It was turning. Toward me. I suddenly heard the breathing again.

The Bosun came farther down the gangway. I shouted at him to go back. But he stayed there, firing burst after burst. All useless. I fired again. Useless.

Then something happened to my eyes. The searchlight beam was

pouring down between me and the gangway. And where the edge of it faded into the dark, I saw something. Or thought I did.

A shape. Flickering and misty. I didn't know how much I was seeing; how much my imagination was filling in.

It was there, almost over me. So big it was everything. Everything except me.

I couldn't move. I don't know whether I was afraid or whether I'd gone past being afraid. But I couldn't move.

Then my eyes cleared. That's what it felt like anyway. Now I could only see the searchlight. There wasn't anything between me and the beam. Nothing.

Not even anything invisible.

And there weren't any more of the footprints.

But I knew the thing that made them had gone. I don't know how I knew. But I knew. There wasn't any doubt.

I suppose I felt it go. Doc could have described it.

But the men knew too. The Bosun came down the gangway and up to me. I was leaning against the side of the ship. My legs felt weak.

Some of the other men started down. But I made the Bosun order them back. I pushed myself upright and started for the gangway. I was a bit unsteady, and the Bosun tried to help me.

I shoved him away. I pulled myself together and made it under my own power . . .

VI

I don't know how long it took to get the whole crew back to normal. Maybe an hour. Maybe more. With the gangway pulled in and the ship sealed tight, they all felt better. But they let go. The hands with more experience were in better shape than the greenwings. But that wasn't saying much.

I dished out double shots of liquor ration to the steadier ones and had Doc's man, who was in pretty good shape, examine the bad cases and dope 'em up with pills or a shot. I got Cookie pulled together and started him brewing coffee by the vatful.

As soon as I could I got off to my cabin. I shut myself in and switched on the audi-vid and buzzed Doc.

I got no answer.

I buzzed for ten minutes more. With the same result.

Had they been attacked out there? When I thought of Altaira I nearly went out of my mind.

It didn't change what I was going to do. It made it a thousand times more urgent.

I got hold of myself and went up to Control and found the Bosun. He already had Nevski and two more techs down in the upper drive chamber working on the core. I told him to collect everybody else, right here.

There was only twelve, counting him.

I gave them a quick brief. I told them we had two objectives: Get the ship flyable and fetch Major Ostrow and the *Bellerophon* people.

I said, "We're four short now, and all of you have essential jobs. So I'm leaving the ship under the Bosun's command and taking the tractor out to get Major Ostrow and the *Bellerophon* people myself."

I'd worked it out. It was the only way. I knew the route, I knew Morbius. And I had the rank and authority to deal with him—if there was anything left to deal with. If I didn't go myself, I'd have to send more than one man. Which might delay everything.

I said, "That's all. Remember you're better off in here than outside. And don't forget the quicker the ship's flyable, the quicker we'll get away."

I let it sink in a minute and then asked if there were any comments.

There weren't. There wasn't a murmur. I checked my equipment over, and took the Bosun to the entry port to let me out. I said, "The ship ought to be ready in a couple of hours. If I'm longer than that without buzzing, you buzz me. If there's another attack before the core's seated—" I shrugged—"stick in the ship and use your own judgment. If there's one after you can lift, take off. Get up as high as you like, and cruise and try to contact me. Use Cadet Starza as Pilot, Levin for Astrogator.

"If everything goes wrong and you're stuck for the trip back without me, use those two. All the time. They're good. And Nevski as Chief Dev." I thought a minute. "I guess that's it."

He said, "Aye aye, sir," old style. He slid the big bar back from the entry port and swung it out and looked all around.

I pushed him aside and ducked through.

He said, "Good luck, sir," and I ran down the gangway and over to the tractor . . .

EIGHT

Commander J. J. Adams (Concluded)

I drove the tractor flat out the whole way. The moons were up now and I didn't need lights.

The faster I went and the nearer I got, the worse I felt. I couldn't get rid of the notion that if I'd buzzed Doc sooner he might have been able to get back to the ship with Altaira—maybe even with Morbius—by using the Robot and that sled thing.

But then I figured they might have been running into danger instead of out . . .

I shot by the chasm and across to that wall of rock and through the break in it. I went down into the valley so fast the tractor seemed to be leaving the ground. .

I had to brake when I hit the curve into the grove. But I took it too fast anyway and tilted the whole job in spite of the gyros. For a second I thought I was over but then they took hold and we came back onto all eight wheels. The jolt snapped my neck and I slowed up. I was so near the house the sick feeling in my stomach almost got me.

I came out of the grove and around the end of the rock. There were lights behind the windows. They shone out over the patio.

I stopped so fast the wheels screamed on the dirt. I vaulted over the side and ran across the patio to the door. There wasn't a sound except my boots on the tiles.

I was pushing at the door when it opened.

And there was Altaira.

She was all right.

I couldn't talk. I reached out and put my arms around her and held her.

She felt wonderful. She was wonderful.

She didn't understand what was the matter with me. She knew I'd been scared about her. But she didn't know why.

I couldn't tell her. There wasn't any time. I pushed her inside and

pulled the door shut behind me. And started firing questions at her. “Where’s Doc? Where’s your father? How is he? Has anything happened?” Now that I knew she was all right, everything else was crowding me.

She didn’t get rattled. She said, “Father’s all right. He’s much better. He was asleep for about two hours, and then he waked. He’s in his room.”

“And Doc?” I said.

She frowned. She looked worried. She said, “I—I think he’s in the—the laboratory. He’s been in there several times. Father would be terribly angry if he knew—”

I had to ask her another question. Nothing to do with the present troubles. But I had to ask. I said, “Altaira, how much do you know about that lab? And what goes on there?”

“I only know what father’s told me.” She looked more worried than she had before. “That it was the Krells’—and that now he works in there. Trying to find out about them, about their civilization.” She shivered. “I don’t like it. I don’t like anyone going in there.”

I put my arm around her. I said, “Neither do I . . . Let’s go get Doc out of it.”

We went through the living-room to the study. The door in the rock was open.

I said to Altaira, “Wait, darling,” and started for the arch. She said, “Let me come with you,” in a funny little voice.

Then I heard somebody walking through the tunnel. I remembered the way our footsteps had echoed. Just like this.

I looked through the arch—and it was Doc.

I stood back. He ducked his head and came out. I started to say something, and then swallowed it as I saw him in the light.

He looked terrible. Stooped and shaky and ten years older. And there were dark stains on the skin around his temples. Purple-black, like bruises. Or burns.

He gave me a smile. But it wasn’t right. It wasn’t him.

He said, “Hi, John—I knew you were coming—” His voice sounded the way he looked.

He came out into the room. And his legs gave. He was falling when I caught him.

He felt—light. I picked him up and carried him over to a couch against the wall. Altaira ran out to the living room and came back with a cushion. I said, “Christ, Doc! I told you to watch it—” I was

looking at the marks on his temples. They were just where the electrodes on that goddamn Krell machine would have been.

He didn't say anything until we'd got him lying down.

Then he said, "Sorry, John . . ." His voice still didn't sound right. It was too old. Too tired. But he made a better try at a smile than the first one.

He said, "It's funny—you were right all the time—" and then stopped. He seemed to be looking at Altaira.

I didn't know what the hell he was talking about. I was worried sick about him. I asked Altaira to get him something. Wine—anything.

She was off in a flash. I sat on the edge of the couch and he took hold of my arm. He said, "Quick—before she comes back. What I meant—you were right about Morbius—But—but—he doesn't know it—" He'd been trying to sit up but now his head dropped back on the cushion.

His eyes were closed, and his face was a sort of dirty-grey. His breath was coming quick and light. He said, "Not much time . . ." His voice was so weak I had to bend my head to hear him. "I took too long this time . . . I knew I was, but I couldn't help it . . ."

He tried to sit up again but I pushed him back. He said, "John—I know all of it—all those answers—I wrote it down—in case—Even just now—"

His eyes closed again. His face was like wax and the marks on the temples looked black.

Altaira came back. She knelt by the couch and slid her arm under his head. She had a glass in her other hand. I stood up, out of her way.

She tried to lift his head up. She said, "Try and drink this. Please!"

His eyes opened. He smiled at her. It was a real Doc smile. He said, "—isn't time, dear—" The smile went and he moved his eyes to look at me.

I went nearer and bent down. He said, "John—John—on the table by—by—"

His voice went away. His lips were moving. But no sound was coming. His eyes closed again and he drew a big breath. It had a rattling sound in it.

I heard myself say, "Doc—Doc—!" The words came out without my knowing.

His face twisted, with the eyes still closed. He made one last tremendous effort.

He said, "By the gate—the Krell gate—"

The rattle in his breathing came again. And his whole body twitched. I thought he was gone.

But then his eyes opened. They weren't looking at Altaira. They weren't looking at me. They were looking at something—somebody—we couldn't see.

He smiled. It was the damndest thing, but while he was smiling he looked young.

"Caroline!" he said.

His voice was loud. It sounded young too.

He twitched again, and his head dropped back.

This time he was gone. I felt for a heartbeat but knew I wouldn't find any.

I straightened. Slowly. I took Altaira by the elbows and lifted her up. There were tears in her eyes.

I've seen a lot of men die. A lot of them were friends. I'd lost two others who were almost friends that day.

But I never felt the way I felt about Doc. Maybe I never will again.

It was quite a while before I could say anything. But then I said, "Cover him up. Get something and cover him up." I was surprised when I heard myself saying it.

Altaira didn't speak. But she put her hands on each side of my face and kissed me.

And then went out.

I couldn't look at Doc any more. I walked over to the other side of the room. And tried to pull myself together. What was that he'd been saying about a gate?

The Krell gate was what he'd said. He'd been trying to tell me about something he'd written . . . All the answers, he'd said . . .

It suddenly hit me. I could hear Morbius' voice in my head—". . . symbols . . . Krell writings . . ."

I whipped around and went to the door in the rock. I ducked under the arch and took the corridor on the run.

I came out into the big space of the lab. I cut over to the center and stopped by the chair Morbius had sat in while he was showing us the damn machine.

The chair was swiveled to face out. The way Doc must have left it.

I didn't like the feel of the damn place. All around me the lights were blinking on and off in the relay boxes. And the thing Morbius had called 'the library' stood there like a goddamned box organ. And

the chair that way—staring at me.

The headpiece of the 'Gateway' thing was hanging on its hooks behind the rail. The arms were bent, and the electrodes made me think of the marks on Doc's temples. My audi-vid belt was hanging over the rail. And there was something on the seat next to Doc's. A square box, with what looked like a book on top of it.

I picked it up. It was Doc's Service notebook, with "C. X. Ostrow" stamped in the leather.

I opened it. Half the pages had been torn out to get to the unused part. The top one of what was left was covered with Doc's neat writing. It began—"For Commander J. J. Adams." And under that it said, "Dear John," like a letter.

There were more pages of the writing. I slipped the book into my pocket. I wanted to get out of here to read it.

I was starting away when I remembered the box. I went back and picked it up. It was dark plastic about six inches square and eight deep. It must have been in Doc's med kit. It was heavy.

I opened it. There was a stack of what looked like thin plates of the Krell metal inside. A lot of them. On top was a slip of paper with more of Doc's writing.

It read: "John—If anything happens to me, KEEP THESE! I think they're recordings. On some incredible cerebro-micro-wave system. DON'T LOSE THEM."

I took the box. And got out of the place quicker than I'd come in. The echos of my feet sounded too loud. Louder than when I'd come in.

I ducked under the arch and was back in the study. It felt good.

Altaira was by the couch. She was unfolding something that looked like a blanket. But it was smooth and soft. And the material sort of glowed.

She looked at me and I dragged the notebook out of my pocket and held it up.

I said, "Doc left me a letter. In this."

She said, "You must read it."

She laid the cloth gently over Doc, covering his face.

I went to the writing table and sat on a corner of it. I opened the notebook and began to read . . .

II

“Dear John,” I read. “This letter may not be necessary. It is written in case I should make an error and let myself in for too much of the Gateway.

“You must understand that I haven’t been, and won’t be, trying to acquire any of the Krell knowledge or learning. There isn’t time, fascinating though it would be. What I am doing is to enlarge my intellectual capacity. It seems quite literally miraculous what effect this machine has upon one. Even after the very short (though repeated) sessions I have had, my comprehension, my grasp of matters of everything, has increased a thousandfold. Problems which seemed insoluble before are as simple as the alphabet!

“Here’s a physical analogy for you. Using the Gateway is to the mind like using some magical exerciser for the body which can increase your muscular force so much (and so quickly) that you find your lifting ability multiplied a hundred times after every minute you use the device. Before you used it, two hundred pounds seemed heavy. Afterwards, it’s a mere feather you can manipulate with one finger of one hand . . .

“That’s not very good, but it will have to serve. Because there may not be too much of what we call ‘time’.

“Now for our problems—your problems.

“Morbius, who I said didn’t strike me as a liar, told you one lie only. But it was epic in proportion. He stated, categorically, that he did not know the final aim of the Krell.

“He did. And it was his own aim too. Because he regards himself (megalomaniac that he is) as their rightful, their appointed successor.

“This aim is simple to state, but so large in conception that it needs contemplation to appreciate.

“It is to create life.

“Not to reproduce life by biological function—but to *create* it. Not from test-tube or seed-bed but basically. By the power of the mind.

“Has that sunk in, John?

“The Krell had the excuse of a long and brilliant (and therefore decadent) history behind them. They were reaching out for what I will call ‘ultimate worlds’ to conquer . . .

“But Morbius has no excuse except sickness. He is a sick man. Sick in the mind. And this sickness is the worst, the most deadly sickness. The greater the mind, the deadlier the sickness.

“Think, John. Think.

“To create life—life in any variation of form—by the power of the mind.

“If that is the aim (and it is!)—it is the aim of usurping the prerogative of the Ultimate Power—of The Builder of the Universe. Of God! . . .

“You will not want to believe that Morbius is working to this appalling end. But you have seen a concrete, positive proof—

“The animals. Altaira’s animals, which—so far as she can remember—weren’t here when she was ‘a very little girl,’ but then ‘just came’.

“They were experiments by Morbius. Experiments which served the secondary purpose of providing companionship and interest for his daughter.

“My autopsy on the little titi monkey should have shown me. It couldn’t have lived. But it did.

“It lived by the power of Morbius’ mind. Which had made it in the outward image of his thought, his memory.

“With my new understanding I know that there are not two divisions to every mind, as our psychologists still maintain, but three. When they speak of the ‘conscious’ and the ‘sub-conscious’ mind they are omitting what I call ‘mid-mind’.

“It is the ‘mid-mind’ which, so to speak, looks after matters first attended to by the ‘conscious mind,’ which then (deliberately or not) thrusts them backward either to be ‘forgotten’ or to make room for newer, more absorbing projects.

“Think about that. It will give you the answer to many questions you have thrust back into your ‘mid-mind’. Exempli gratia—Why the animals had the protective coloration to fit an Earth background rather than an Altairian; and why the tiger attacked Altaira after the consummation of your love for her . . .

“You have now read your groundwork. So back to the PRACTICAL you love so much—

“But with this preamble:

“The Krells, in the insolence of their success, tried to usurp the power of God. And were destroyed.

“Morbius, in the insolence bred by megalomania, has been, and is, working toward the same end. He has not yet reached the point where he will inevitably be destroyed. But he is approaching it.

“There is no record—there cannot be—of how the entire Krell race was wiped out. But I feel that I know.

“If the power of the ‘conscious’ mind is raised to such a pitch that Creation by it is possible, the potential power of the ‘sub-conscious’ mind should not be ignored.

“But the Krells, I am sure, ignored it. Their one weakness. They didn’t reckon upon what our psychologists call the ‘Id’—and the possibility that a creation, far the reverse of what the ‘conscious’ creation might be, could spring into being without the knowledge of either the ‘conscious’ or ‘mid-mind’.

“The dictionary tells us the Id in the psychological sense is “the fundamental mass of life tendencies, out of which the ego and the libido tendencies develop.” Which may mean, and in my present usage does mean, the mass of formless, bestial impulses, entirely self-centered, which are part of the basis of every thinking creature . . .

“Now, suppose the collective ‘conscious’ minds of a race to have developed to a pitch where the forbidden creation is an established or about to be established fact. What more logical than to suppose that, at the same time, the ‘sub-conscious’ mind—the Id—has developed to the point of autogenesis?

“The result? The letting loose, upon an unsuspecting and defenseless race of beings, of a horde of dread and insensate monsters! The most frightful monsters of all—the realized basenesses of their own natures! Monsters concrete and yet impalpable! Monsters with illimitable physical powers to rend and destroy but with no true physicality to be rent or destroyed themselves!

“An appalling thought, John. But one which I am already convinced is the true answer to the extinction of the Krell. And one which explains, too, dark passages in the life of Morbius upon this planet . . .

“I shall see more, know more, when I have been able to dare another sitting at the Gateway—”

III

The page of writing stopped there, in the middle. I turned it over and saw there was more. But the writing wasn’t neat any more. It was scrawled. It got wilder and wilder.

I felt a hand on my arm. I jumped. And looked up and saw it was Altaira who’d touched me.

I tried to smile, but I don’t think it worked.

Doc had gotten through to me all right. I might have taken a dose of that machine myself the way I understood. I put a hand up to my forehead and found it was clammy with sweat.

Altaira said, “What is it, John?” She looked at the notebook. “What is he telling you?”

I liked the way she said that. Not “What did he write you?” but “What is he telling you?”

But she sounded afraid. She was afraid.

I put my arm around her.

And Morbius walked in.

He stopped as he saw us. His face was—different. Lined. And pouched under the eyes. And his hair—I’ll swear there was twice as much white in it. His eyes were way back in his head, but they were the only things about him that looked alive. They looked too alive.

Altaira said, “Father!”

I got ready to take my arm away. But she didn’t want me to. She pressed against me.

Morbius looked at the couch. His mouth twisted and he went over and took hold of the top of the dark blanket and ripped it back from Doc’s face.

He stared at Doc’s face. He put out a hand and touched the temples, where the dark marks were.

He said, “The fool! The blind fool! Playing with things too big for him!”

Altaira moved a little away from me. She knew what I was going to do.

I stood up. I walked over to the couch. I shouldered past Morbius. I pulled the cover back over Doc’s face.

I turned around and looked at Morbius. I didn’t say anything.

He said, “And why are you here, Commander?”

I said, “To take you away. Back to Earth.” I kept my eyes on his face. “Whether you like it or not.”

“And Altaira?”

“She comes with me. She would in any case.” I hit the *any*.

He moved then. He went over to the desk and stood beside her. I started after him. But thought better of it and stayed where I was.

He looked down at her. He said, “Altaira! Would you go with this—with this man?”

She said, “Yes, Father.”

“Even if I refused to go with him? You would leave me here? Alone?”

She took a moment over that one. But she didn’t stop looking at him. She said, “Yes, Father. I would have to go.”

He was standing sideways to me. But even then I saw something

happening to his face. Something behind it.

I could feel something happening, too. Something—outside. Outside him. Outside this whole place. But—but belonging to him, whatever it was.

It was a bad feeling. I went over to him and tapped him on the shoulder. I said, “Are you ready? To come to the ship?”

He turned as if I’d hit him. Altaira shrank away. He said, “Do you think you can make me go?” He pointed at the couch. “Haven’t you learned what happens to meddlers? Look at that fool there—or what’s left of him!”

I said, “That fool had you figured, Doctor Morbius.” It was all I could do not to hit him.

Behind him I saw Altaira turn suddenly and look at the window. But I hadn’t time to wonder about it.

I kept after Morbius. I said, “He found out what destroyed the Krells. *He* found what they were after. And you! And that you were lying about it!”

I picked Doc’s notebook up from the desk and opened it. I wished Altaira didn’t have to be there.

He tried to stop me reading, but I pushed him off. I read him what I wanted him to hear. Not all of it. But enough.

He was shaking as if he had ague. He said, “It’s—it’s madness! Insanity!”

I didn’t like his eyes. I got that outside-something feel again.

I said, “And he had more. I haven’t read it yet—”

Altaira screamed.

She was looking at the window again. I was beside her in a couple of jumps. She pointed. Out to the grove.

She said, “There’s—there’s something in the trees—” She turned and hid her face against my shoulder. She was shaking all over.

I looked through the glass. I didn’t see anything.

Then one of the biggest trees—broke.

It was snapped off a couple of feet from the ground.

It fell in the direction of the house. As if a hurricane had been blowing from behind it. But there wasn’t a leaf moving on the other trees. This one had been in the way. Of something. It was thirty feet high and at least six feet in diameter. And it had broken like a match stick.

But there was nothing else to see. To see—

I knew what it was. I thought I knew what it was. I had to be sure.

I opened the notebook again and found the scrawled end pages.

I heard Altaira say, “The shutters—the shutters!” She was whispering. Talking to herself. She ran out of the room. I heard her calling, “Robby—Robby, the shutters!”

I knew Morbius hadn’t moved to go after her. I knew Morbius was looking at me. Concentrating on me.

I started to read. There wasn’t much of it. The writing was so big.

There was a flicker in the light. Just a flicker—and I looked up.

The Krell-metal shutters were over the windows, closing out everything.

I dropped the notebook on the desk. Morbius was still staring at me. He hadn’t moved. I felt sick at my stomach now I knew. I wasn’t surprised—but it’s different when you know.

I pointed to the book. “There’s the whole story, Morbius. Doc got it. He killed himself doing it—but he got it. That first shock you gave yourself on the machine; that liberated something in you. You didn’t know it then, but you’d gotten half the effect of the Krell knowledge without the learning . . . You and your wife didn’t want to go back to Earth. But the rest of your party did. You knew that if they went back you wouldn’t have a chance to stay here and study by yourself. You wished they were all dead—”

He said, “Stop! Stop!” He was almost shouting.

I said, “You wished they were dead . . . And then they were! You killed them. Your Id killed them. It tore them to pieces. It ripped them apart as if they were rag dolls, Morbius. The way it did to my men tonight—”

He shouted, “Stop!”

I said, “You didn’t know then. But you went on learning, Morbius. And you found out. So it wasn’t in your subconscious any more. It was up there in your consciousness. But you pushed it away; rammed it back. And shut it up in what Doc calls your ‘mid-mind’. Where you put the things you want to forget—but don’t want to bury so deep you can’t use ‘em if you have to?”

He stood there. Staring at me.

Altaira came running in. She looked at him—and stopped. And put her hands over her face.

I said to him, “You hate me for taking your daughter. You hate your daughter for choosing me instead of you . . .”

There was a sound from the outside house. I can’t describe it. It

wasn't a voice. But it wasn't anything else.

Altaira gasped. She was white as paper. She came at me in a little run. I put my arm around her. I could feel her trembling.

I heard the sound outside again. It was nearer.

I suddenly thought of that dream I'd had on the ship, when something kept breathing—soft and too big. Then I thought of young Grey. And how he'd heard, 'something breathing, sir—something awful big!' I remembered him screaming, just before he'd been stamped down into the sand . . .

The sound was right outside the window. But outside the shutters too. I thought, Thank God for the shutters . . .

I made myself look at Morbius. I had to look at him. I had to hold him.

I said to him, "That's you outside, Morbius . . ."

The sound was louder now. It wasn't the same sound—but it was made by the same thing. It wasn't just breathing. It was—it was snuffling . . .

Morbius put his hands up to his head. The fingers seemed to be digging into his skull. I could see his face. There was a rumbling metallic noise. It vibrated. The whole house front seemed to be shaking . . . I said again, "That's you, Morbius!" I said, "You killed your friends. You've killed my friends. Now you want to kill me—and your daughter. And your daughter, Morbius!"

The shaking stopped. There wasn't a sound. It was worse than the breathing. Morbius said, "No—no!"

I knew I had to go on. I knew our only chance was to make him admit. Admit to himself. Admit to his Conscious.

I said, "It was in your mind—your mid-mind. You 'forgot' it. So you had to be asleep to release it. But you knew. It wasn't deep in your subconscious. You knew! If you hadn't, you wouldn't have fought against sleeping the way you did."

There was another rumbling of metal, and the shaking. It was from further along. From near the big door.

Suddenly Morbius ran—out into the living room. And then stopped. His body was bent over. He was twisting about. Like a man trying—I don't know—like a man struggling to get free of something tying him.

I went after him. I had to. I dropped my arm from around Altaira and made the living room in a couple of jumps.

But she was right beside me. I felt her hand on my wrist—and found my DR pistol was in my hand.

She said, “John—” and I pushed the gun back into my holster.

The shaking came again. The whole house trembled. There was a rending clang from the shutters. The metal was being—torn.

The metallic screeching stopped. And something hit the big door from the outside. The wood groaned.

I started for Morbius—and then stopped when I saw Altaira running across the room behind him. She was making for the Robot. It was standing by the alcove. She spoke to it—and the light came on in its headpiece.

There was another crash against the door, and a noise of wood cracking. I thought Morbius was going to fall and grabbed him. I shouted something at him—I don’t know what.

Everything was happening at once. Altaira was pointing at the door as she said to the Robot, “Stop it—stop it getting in!” Morbius was fighting to get away from me. I could see the Robot over his shoulder —

The thing was jibbing—fighting an impossible order. Its lights were flashing crazily—and there was a whining sound coming from it. The way it had when it couldn’t use the DR on me that first day.

There was another blow on the door. It boomed like thunder.

I said to Morbius, “You can stop it! You’re the only one! Admit to yourself what it is! Admit it’s you!”

He shouted, “No—no!” again—up high, like a woman.

The Robot was a dead lump of metal. Altaira came running across to me. I yelled, “Back—into the study—” and started dragging at Morbius.

And the door fell in. We couldn’t see it—but there was no mistaking the sound.

Morbius was resisting me. But Altaira took his arm and he stopped. We rushed him into the study. I didn’t look behind me, but I could hear the breathing.

I dropped my hold on him and slid the door shut and snapped the lock. The sort of futile thing one does.

There was a crash on the door. The wood split. The breathing was loud.

Altaira was trying to get Morbius to the open archway in the rock. Now he was hanging back. I ran to them and got my arm around him and forced him to the arch and through it. He sagged against me, limp.

Altaira said, “John—how do we shut it—we have to shut it—”

Behind us, around the ell, I heard the study door crash down.

And I didn't know how to shut this one.

But Morbius straightened up. He made a sort of sign in the air with his hand. And then sagged against me again.

The sheet of metal slid into the arch. Filling it.

I thought I saw something on the other side just as it closed. A shadow. Something . . .

And I heard something. It wasn't a voice. But it wasn't anything else.

I pushed Morbius off and went to Altaira. She was leaning against the rock wall. She was shaking like a Venusian-fever case. She didn't say anything, just buried her face against my shoulder.

There was a concussion against the metal door. As if a thunderbolt had hit it.

But it stood. It didn't even vibrate.

Suddenly, Morbius moved. Along the rock corridor to the lab chamber. He was trying to run, stumbling.

I left Altaira and went after him. But she was right behind me.

I caught him at the end of the chamber. The place was big and calm. Just the same. As if nothing was happening—never had happened.

It was quiet too. Completely quiet. There wasn't a sound from the archway behind us. It was worse than any noise would have been.

I grabbed Morbius' arm. He tried to pull away but I yanked him closer. I said, "Running won't help—"

His face was—horrible. I couldn't look at it. I said, "You must admit what it is, man!"

He said, "No!" His voice was a sort of rattling whisper. "It's going away!" he said. "It's going way—"

I looked along the rock corridor. There wasn't a sound—

But the metal door in the arch was changing. It was a different color. The dun-gray wasn't there any more. It was a reddish pink. Glowing. And darkening to crimson-red while I watched.

A drift of air much hotter than the rest came across my face.

I said, "No, Morbius. It's not going away. Look at that!"

I tried to force him to turn his head. He fought me—but I made him look.

And I saw something else. All the lights in the chamber—all the relays, all the rows in the big central column-gauge of the, 'island'—

they'd all gone mad. Flickering on. Winking off. Not in any steady pattern. Like a crazy dance . . .

I made Morbius look. I said, "See the power! It's flowing into that thing out there! Into you! . . . You can do anything! Nothing can stop you!"

He was suddenly strong. Stronger than I was. He pushed me away as if I was a child.

He said, "You say I knew. I didn't. I don't!"

The air was hotter now. A broad stream, filling the chamber. I looked along the corridor.

The metal of the door in the arch was white-hot. Molten. Streams of it were bubbling down onto the rock floor. Flaky lumps of it were dropping inwards. There was a hole in the center. It was getting bigger all the time.

I said, "The last chance, Morbius . . . Admit, man—admit!"

He stood there. I don't think he even heard me. He was immovable now. His body and his mind . . .

I switched my eyes to the corridor again. For a microsecond. The hole in the metal wasn't a hole any more. It nearly filled the archway. Something moved on the other side.

I knew I had to do it. Do it now . . . I could only hope to God Altaira would understand . . .

I put my hand on the butt of my gun. I started to pull it out. I fixed my eyes on a point between his shoulders . . .

And Altaira walked between us. As if I wasn't there.

She stood in front of him. She said, "John's right, Father. You must believe it!"

She stood as tall as she could and put her hands up to his face. And kissed him on the cheek.

The breathing was in the corridor. Close.

Something happened to Morbius. He didn't look at Altaira. Or at me. He waved us back. He went to the mouth of the corridor . . .

I put my arms around Altaira, turning her so she couldn't see . . .

But I could . . . Or maybe it wasn't seeing. Maybe it was feeling . . .

All I know is that there was—Something there. Framed in the rock. Something facing Morbius. Huge, impossible. Looming over him—around him.

Morbius stood like the rock itself. His head was tilted, looking up—

My eyes wouldn't work. My head was spinning. I felt the way you

might feel if your mind was your stomach—

I felt as if my mind was—was vomiting . . .

Altaira's arms came around my neck. I could hear her whispering, "Don't look, darling—don't look!"

I turned my head away . . .

We waited . . .

There was no sound . . . Or was there? I don't know . . .

Thsn there was a feeling. A sensation of—of easing . . .

I found my head was lifting, turning so that I could see—

But I still don't know what I saw. Or didn't see but felt . . .

But I knew.

I knew the thing that had been facing Morbius was fading . . .

And then it was gone.

But the man went on standing with his back to us.

His head sank. I could see the strength leaving him . . .

He turned—slowly. And staggered. And came slowly back to us.

Altaira broke away from me. She stood in front of him. She said, "Father! . . . Father!" She was looking up into his face. "Are you all right, Father?"

I moved nearer to them. He said, "Yes, Altaira. Yes." He said, "There's nothing to trouble you now. Nothing."

He swayed. I thought he was going to fall.

I could see his face now. I hardly knew it. It was—it was a good face.

But he was burned out. Exhausted. There was no life behind his eyes.

He looked down at Altaira—and bent his head and kissed her. He said, "Forgive me, my dear—forgive me—"

She put her arms around him. She murmured something I couldn't hear.

He said, "Let me go, Altaira." He said it gently, but there was something in his voice.

He looked at me. All the feelings I'd had about him seemed to have changed.

He must have known what I was thinking. He said, "Come with me a moment, John," and smiled.

He walked slowly out to the center. Every step looked as if it took all his strength. I put a hand under his arm to help him.

He stopped. I wondered why, because there was nothing here. But he pointed down at the rock floor. He said, “John, if you would lift that for me . . .”

I looked down and saw a tile let into the rock.

I bent and got my fingers under the edge of it. I lifted it out—and saw a thing like a big plunger-switch, sealed across the top.

I asked him what it was. But he didn’t answer. He knelt down beside it, slowly and carefully.

He said, “Something I must do—” and reached down for the thing.

He checked. He looked up at me. He said, “John, is your ship ready to lift?”

I didn’t know what he was getting at. I had a strange feeling. But I answered him. I said, “Yes, sir. Or she will be within an hour or so.”

He didn’t say anything. He just smiled at me. He reached down and broke the seal across the top of the plunger.

He put his hand on it—and threw all his weight on the hand.

The plunger sank.

Still kneeling, he looked up at me. And then at Altaira.

He said, “In twenty-four hours there will be no planet Altair-4 . . . John, before then, you must be ten billion miles out in space . . .”

He started to get up—and swayed—and fell.

Altaira dropped down beside him. She lifted his head so that it rested on her lap.

She said, “Father—Father—,” and then stopped.

I thought he’d gone—but his eyes opened and he looked up at her.

He whispered, “I’m glad it’s this way, Alta . . . Be happy, dear. Be happy on earth—and forget the stars . . .”

Postscript

Excerpts from “this third millennium—A Condensed Textbook for Students” by A. G. Yakimara, H.B., Soc.D., etc.

(The following are taken from the revised microfilm edition, dated Quatuor 15, 2600 A.D.)

. . . This frightful, cosmically-powered explosion, resulting in the complete disintegration of the Planet Altair-4, was visible to all Astronomers in the Solar System. The awe-inspiring, terrible beauty of the sight will never be forgotten by those who witnessed it . . .

It was, of course, considered a natural phenomenon—until the return, on Sexter 20th, 2391, of the Cruiser C-57-D, when Commander J. J. Adams first was able to relate his epic tale.

* * *

. . . There is good reason to believe that, at first, Commander Adams’ reports of the scientific supremacy of this ancient and defunct race did not receive complete credence. However, when he exhibited (and ‘put through its paces’) the anthroform robot-machine constructed by Doctor Morbius, doubts began to dissolve . . .

* * *

. . . A high pitch of frustration was reached over the so-called “Cerebro-micro-wave” records brought back by Commander Adams. And it was not until nearly sixty years later that these remarkable devices were analyzed and interpreted. They were of the highest importance, being the first examples of the possibility of what we now called Mnemono-Verbal Transmission—or the transmitting, by instant memory-wave, of a recording, in the words the memorizer would have used, of any experience.

The content of the records, however, was of little scientific value.

They comprised Major Ostrow's impressions of his stay on Altair-4, and various 'experiences' of Doctor Morbius. These latter might have been invaluable, except for the fact that they used the Krell terms of reference and have therefore never been completely deciphered. The only recording which has been completely translated refers to the 'tour of inspection' of the Krell underground powerhouse upon which he took Commander Adams and Major Ostrow . . .

* * *

. . . It is easy to understand why the saga of the C-57-D has attained such romantic status. Take, for instance, the marriage of Commander Adams to the daughter of Edward Morbius. It was performed in Deep Space, on the journey back from the exploded planet. And in order for the ceremony to be legal, Commander Adams was forced formally to relinquish his command (for the space of fifteen minutes!) to his Bosun, Zachary Todd . . .

* * *

. . . Regarded as a major tragedy by many scientists, the auto-destruction of Altair-4 was, in a way, welcomed by the Church and most thoughtful men and women.